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# WOMAN

# WOMAN

By
MAGDELEINE MARX

INTRODUCTION BY
HENRI BARBUSSE

TRANSLATED BY ADELE SZOLD SELTZER

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# INTRODUCTION

A splendid book in which a soul lives so profoundly human and so purely feminine that any words of introduction seem leaden and intrusive. You feel as though you were violating the essential delicacy and powerful life of this soul to comment upon the remarkable revelation of it between the very covers that contain the revelation.

Yet, as a modest friend of letters, I should like to express an opinion here—the author did not ask me for it—and pay homage to the brilliant originality of this work. I want to give myself the pleasure of saying how important I think it is.

It expresses—and this is a fact of considerable literary and moral import—what has never been exactly expressed before. It expresses Woman.

The more woman has been spoken about, you might say, the less she has been revealed. She has been hidden under a plethora of words. The supreme vision rising up out of these pages is as luminous as a heavenly revelation. From the author's tone, so simple and penetrating, you perceive that women feel differently about the things that we men see and proudly proclaim.

The thought and spirit of *Woman* will be a surprise and a shock to the old masculine traditions, in which women also acquiesce, probably because of their old traditions of slavery. But we know that always and everywhere the opposition such thought arouses is sublimely lacking in truth.

Here is a woman who cries out with magnificent impressive sincerity against the fallacy of the maternal instinct—the "call of the blood"—against the exclusiveness of love; who knows and asserts that death kills only the dead, and not those who are left behind; who recreates in new forms the law and the creed of the relations between man and woman, motherhood, and suffering. And this new expression of woman—a new expression, therefore, of the whole of life—this striking



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gospel, young and strong, which overcomes artificial, unnatural ideas, resounds at the very time when woman is at last entering humanity and is preparing to change her rôle of breeder of children and handmaid in common.

The book is strictly, religiously objective. Everything is perceived only through the eyes, the mind, the heart of the "heroine"—the word usage thrusts upon us for this woman who has no name, who is just truly herself. Through the commanding will of the author the creative richness of the book springs altogether from the magnificent oneness of a human being. No outside approach mars this unity. In no other book perhaps so markedly as in this has the integrity of an individual been more respected, and never has an imaginary character so consistently warded off whatever is not of itself. You don't even seem to feel that this "Woman" talks or tells a story. You simply know what she knows.

And because of this very fact, this intimate association which unites us jealously with this one being of all others, the book is poignant and moving. A world is born beneath our eyes. In some scenes, short or long but always important and vital, a tragedy shudders, and the entire succession of the events of life, ordinary and on a big scale, passes in the book in clear outline, in essential poetry.

To say this is to say that the author is a master, that her technique is subtle, that the action concentrates all the dramas of the world in one spiritual drama, and the book reveals a prodigious gift for presenting a whole of vast impressions which creates unity.

*Woman* does not belong to any class of writing; it is not tied down by any formula; it does not lower itself by imitating. It is a powerful, a rebel, a virgin work, and it ranks Magdeleine Marx among the loftiest poets of our age.

*HENRI BARBUSSE.*

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# BOOK I

## *BEING BORN*

# I

THE sun was beginning to shine.

I had been walking and walking. . . .

I had just left the brambly path which cuts a bed of sand through the forest, laying bare its rusty bowels.

I felt full-fed by the subtle nourishment that space distils, crammed with air, and my forehead seemed drawn taut. Was it the motes dancing in the sunbeams? I don't know. I was spent. The fancy throbbed beneath my temples, did its work, and I let it go.

You must have been sincere at least once in your life to know what an hour is face to face with yourself, a whole hour, step by step, minute by minute. And I never had been sincere. Now I escaped from my clogging limbs, from the clay of myself. Until now I had done nothing but breathe and sleep. All of a sudden I was alive. It was intoxicating. . . .

Dizzy though I was I felt an exhausting need to keep on going.

I penetrated deep into the woods walking at random, my mind almost a blank. When the leafy undergrowth enclosed me, I let myself slide to the ground on to the dried-up grass, the fallen twigs, and the crackling russet pine-needles.

All about in a dense circle, the rugged plant

life. A moving splendor in the play of the varying greens. Damp, aromatic smells. And a sense of invisible swarming life everywhere. . . .

The silence, so fresh and penetrating, was like a living thing, and I turned round several times thinking I heard some one behind me panting. No one. The uneven trunks of the great trees; lower down, behind their serrated green, a slate-colored screen of mist; here, the shadow-broidered ground; above, the patches of blue sky—and I.

I . . .

I was a little ashamed to link my Self to myself in this way, to give my Self its value. The old attitude of humility, of attaching no importance to Self—was that going to begin again? Now I felt more profoundly alone than in the harmonious exaltation I had experienced while walking. In a mixture of alarm and idleness I tried not to remain motionless, but to plant my elbows on the ground and lie flat on the grass with my head between my hands, so as to divert myself with living noise . . . I could not.

Then I stretched out on my back, my eyes fixed on the sky, my body relaxed; and the full-blooded tide of my thoughts flowed over me.

They flowed on, of themselves, no longer halting, as they had on the walk, on the edge of each discovery; I no longer kept saying to myself as when I hammered out my pitiless steps: "I have lied, I have always lied, I have lived only on the outskirts of my life." . . . The air was still,

the soul alone sounded, and the soul also was at peace. I went down into the depths—to find the soul's sweet beginnings, I suppose.

There were no beginnings. Though my early memories came back obediently, they were not illuminating. The catechism. . . . With outstretched hands and rounded voice, the Abbé Daudret was telling of the wicked, those whom the Almighty was waiting to punish in the hereafter. Crushed by the word wicked, stifled by the heavy solemnity of the church, withdrawn into my littleness, I comprehended, with dull, recurring pangs, that I was among the damned, I, the model little girl. We went home again; I was calm, unruffled, obedient, but if any one used the word sinful in my hearing, if I came across it threatening in black and white, I felt as if a brutal fist had struck my shoulder; I blushed, a swift remorse flamed in my bowels; that word was meant for me, *I* was the guilty one.

At last one day I found out why I was guilty. I had not known before.

I had been summoned to the small drawing-room; the shutters were closed; my mother, a dim figure in the twilight, was saying good-bye to a lady in deep mourning whose veil framed a face of alabaster. How beautiful she was! The quivering shadows made a halo around her. I scarcely dared to approach her because I remembered the whispers that buzzed about her name and the envy that glittered in the eyes of the women. How beautiful she was! . . . Her heavy

lashes weighed down her lids. . . . I wanted to say something to her, just one word. I could not, could not even repeat what my mother, leaning towards me, told me to say. . . . As the lady was leaving she turned in the doorway, fixed her great wide eyes on me and said with an even sadder note in her velvety voice: "The child is going to be beautiful."

I heard myself exclaim with joy. As soon as the door closed, I ran to the glass, which seemed to be waiting for me. My whole being was aflame as I raised myself on tiptoe to receive the first echo of her words from the mirror. . . . But my mother was already coming back and saying severely: "You know it isn't true." . . . I was still on tiptoe. "You are ugly!" My spirits dropped and instantly were bottled up in me. Everything was clear, I understood, I understood. . . .

It was an epitome of my life. The seasons passed; I maintained silence, always, hiding my good qualities, hiding my bad qualities, encountering only remorse between the two extremes; for it is by remorse that they are joined together.

Consequently my mind stored up no happening, no deeper or fainter impression, only remorse. Remorse never left me.

But yes, it did leave me, just now, suddenly, at the bend of the road, where the bank slopes gently down to the ditch, when I bowed my head to the thought, "They think me gentle, simple, just like the others; they say I am cleverer. It is

only because I dissemble more than the others."

At that I raised my eyes.

"What after all does my lying matter to them? Do they want the truth? No. They spurn it, scourge it, hunt it down. They are not worth trying to find out the truth for. Enough."

The sunshine seemed to tighten its clutch on the earth and whitewashed the pathway.

"But it is not this matter of lying that one must bewail; the point is, there is an essential *something else.* There is—I feel there is—the true life, my life, and it is this true life that I have betrayed. My true life is now pushing on, bravely, along the gray stony path. . . . I don't know where it is going, nor what it is, since I have never seen it in anything that I have done, but it must live. If I die for it, what does it matter? It will live on. It was hidden in my body, it stayed there ashamed of itself, then came at night to beset me with its sadness and put me to sleep with the taste of dust and ashes on my lips; and in the morning, as soon as my eyes opened, was it the light that flooded over me, painted the walls of my room with flame, and instantly died away?"

The blue density of the forest, the corrugated, soaring columns of the trees, high and distinct in their parallel lives, the clear quivering azure are all around me. Where is their obscure will?

I have come to these things, I have lain down in their midst, I have watched them. Before these

things one no longer lies. And behold, I find myself.

I see myself as I am.

My heavy hair, flame-colored, which gives out little glints of light above my forehead, my complexion with the mother-of-pearl coloring of the full daylight, the violet reflections in my eyes deepened by the scanty shade of the trees, the firm red line of my lips, and beneath my light dress, the fleet suppleness encased in my limbs.

Is it possible? I am no longer ashamed to be like this, nor to *know* what I am like. I have let fall, at last, like a bothersome mask, the modest air that makes people say: "She's all the prettier because she doesn't know she's pretty."

Do you think, pray, that there is a single woman in the world who, if she is good looking, doesn't know it?

I know, I know with a vengeance, that I am beautiful; I know it better than anything else about myself. There are not only looking-glasses, there are all the men. Whether old man, beggar, or chance passerby, you drink in, in one long intoxicating draught: "I am beautiful." And the women, if you know the terror in their eyes, the appeal, the envy, and their mute defense. . . . You seem unaware, smiling, distant, but you are on the eager watch for the pain you inflict.

To please . . . In the presence of other people to please is wicked vanity, strutting, flaunting vanity; but here, on the bony ground, it is sim-

ply a bit of me. It is a power which has been given me, I shall not give it back; it is merely a harmony, a response to the beauty I feel, a craving to convince, a very strong craving; my life is lovelier than I.

My life is here. But what makes up my life? Not entirely my rosy good health, nor this firm equilibrium which exercises control in the centre of my being. My health and poise are, chiefly, the things that remove me from my life. My life is a need to use my muscles, it is vigorous movement, it is the notion I have that I can crush the world between my arms; yes, the longing to run, to take part in everything, to shout aloud, to dance; this animal ardor and glow in movement, this uncontrollable blood, this body swelling with liberty, with sap, with bursts of laughter, this unexpected gift of myself to myself, this curiosity and contentment, this zest and turmoil. . . .

I have heard others speak of youth, I have seen the word of quicksilver glitter on the pages of books; I am still ignorant of its meaning; I am not quite twenty.

I hug to me all that is mine; it is not much. At first there was nothing above my head but a liquid ocean of silence, I saw nothing but a forest without perspective, but my watchful solitude became supernatural; and now as I see the solemnity of the trees, their strong solid reaching up towards heaven, as I see *myself,* I feel very deeply that I am alive for the first time.

I do not wish to think of the future. Let the

future wait for me; it is as if a new era were beginning. . . .

And may memory never take possession of this morning of utter unreserve; memory might distort it. And may memory never say: "This was the day of your birth and you were excited."

I am not unduly excited. . . . The present is always very simple. The sun is only an iridescent frolic, which flits and laughs without resting on the chapped bark of the pines.

This moment—this and none other—is made up of my robust body, the lullaby rustle of the wind-stirred leaves, the fragrance of resinous wood, the screech of a great bird, and the sky cleft by its black and white passage.

No illumination or help from elsewhere. Slowly, gropingly, by great effort, I arrive at lukewarm moments in which it is as though my head were leaning on my heart. Am I going to *know* at last and make up my mind? But when I put my hand on my breast, everything collapses and I have to begin all over again.

It is because there is an empty past which rings to the touch like an empty bowl, a lack of practice which benumbs your arms, a sort of shame . . . You don't attain to your real truth at the first attempt.

And then above all—you must be honest with yourself—you don't seek your true self with a *constant* heart; far oftener you try to distract your mind from the thought of it. About me on the ground are patches of light, and I am simply

bent upon catching them. I stretch out my hand, stoop down, put my cheek to them, they quiver and vanish; in their place a piercing warmth steals dancing over my face.

Then, without my having done anything and without my being worthy of it, the sacred mood of revolt returns, lifts me up, and forces me to my knees; I hear the rising breath of a sudden call . . .

Is it my life, O God? Whither does it go—answer!—when it develops in a deep breast, and you approach, again and again, as I am now approaching, something infinite whose name you seek to know?

## II

Will the noise never stop? But there are walls to shut it out.

Let them hop about, shout, dance, amuse themselves. As for me, I have left them, I am alone in my room, I don't want to see or hear them any more.

I burrow my head desperately in the dark depths of the cushions. In vain. The eddying music follows its implacable course, drapes its arabesques of melody about me, and when I stop my ears, still keeps whirling round and round.

A mazurka. Who was it begged for a mazurka? Ah yes, I remember. When I left the group of young girls sitting on the watch, a quivering bas-

ket of artificial flowers, one of them was saying: "After the mazurka, I'll take *him* out into the garden, where I'll manage to make him kiss me."

Which of them? It is easy to imagine her: they are all alike. She laughs, I am certain, and expands her budding breasts; her beaded tunic sparkles and strikes a rivulet of light against her pretty legs; she has glossy hair faultlessly dressed and when she turns round in the mazurka, you see she has one of those plump, discreet faces over which feelings slide without leaving a mark.

But I am forgetting. Mother had to take part in the dance too, as it was the only one she knew and it unrolled tender memories. She braced herself, then started off, her features gently composed, leaning on my father, who accommodated his step to hers while seeming to guide her. "Let's see, that's not it . . ." and they set out again—one, two, three, four—heavy, both of them, with their reputation as a happy, united couple, and laden with the looks that follow them.

If one knew . . .

The engaged couples have disappeared, swallowed up by the nearest dark corners, where passion is of scarlet and nothing exists but arms and lips and bodies surmised. When the music will have finished and they will have reappeared, the chatter and the sharp raw laugh of the young fiancée will be heard; she will open her eyes wide, like this; her childish mouth will be seen, and her slim figure, which retains an air of awkward shyness. "How unsophisticated she is," they will

say in gratitude to her for being an example of the velvety purity of the young girls.

The last measures. They are all perspiring, out of breath, soberly triumphant, and as they go back to their chairs each man gives a last squeeze of the slender arm he is about to relinquish.

My father is entirely engrossed in his guests; he has led mamma, dizzy, back to her chair, and has moved off. As she sits there with her eyelashes fluttering, you would think she has returned from a wonderful long journey. "I am happy, happy," she is reflecting. "I have such a good husband." The wounds of every day are closed—they have to be overlooked—and if any cloud darkens the horizon, it is that she is thinking of me: "But that is what marriage means, my little daughter; you'll see, it is just a big renunciation: you will change, you too, and do like the rest; look at me; am I unhappy?"

No, you are not unhappy, my poor little mother, with your injured voice, your charitable eyes, and your lifeless gestures; you are dead; it is twenty years since you have had a will of your own, a desirous look, a single manifestation of impatience, a stray impulse, an hour, anything you can call your own; it is twenty years since you renounced. But your husband never goes out, he has his wife and children, he earns your living, a comfortable living; everyone respects him, and "one cannot have everything."

As for you, you can live contentedly with a

twenty-year-old unhappiness upon your shoulders; you breathe, you go about; the women around you have the same fate, and this sustains you. But we, mother, who are different, the daughters of my generation, we who have sensual hearts, reasoning minds, new energies—*I,* who have done nothing, I cannot, I tell you, and if a future is given me, I want to snatch whatever it holds.

The music has stopped; I cannot hear them any more . . . It is as if my heart were beginning to live.

The tangible darkness of the room deepens little by little. Its peace, its solitude. I can distinguish the walls, or rather the vaporous shadows of walls, the windows where the cold light of the garden is paling, the indistinct rectangle which stretches along the ceiling . . . and in that silence in which God is rooted is the hunted soul returning to its place.

Ah, shattered again! The music sets the hubbub going . . .

Besides, certain words are too beautiful, and you say them to intoxicate yourself, but when they are gone, you realize your arms are empty.

I asked myself: "What is youth?" This is what youth is: that terrible thing, that sin, that torture which one must stifle: it is my pure intoxication defiled by their impure intoxication. I wanted to sing my youth, give it out, exhale it. Jeering life is below, with its people, its fouling habits, its sneers and titters. They were quite

right; you can't escape it. You must adapt yourself to it; it is the law. I will adapt myself; I will have a husband; he will be kind, faithful; there will be no one beside him; he will be all in all to me; he will skirt the shores of my being; he will pronounce judgment on all my actions, my comings and goings, my looks; his word will be final. I shall lie in his bed every night; he will see my timid body, my naked sleep, my sleeping life; he will stand upright in my life as in a garden which one is not afraid to ravage, and when truth will pass by us, he will sit still and let it pass.

I shall have no more confused desires, no more sudden impulses of kindliness, no more agonized expectancy, and no more of those questionings which make a stifling desert about me. I shall be satisfied. If my hell returns at times to visit me, that red-eyed narrow-chested hell, my husband will be there, seated opposite me at table; he will raise his head. "What's the matter, aren't you hungry?"

The soul, the essence, the deep voice from within—words, mere words . . . There is nothing but the noise below. And only that. And I must return to it. Well, come on, go down, speak, smile. All existences are alike. When there is no longer a single lie left to tell, it means the time has come to die.

Why obstinately wish to discover a way out and knock your head against a stone wall? There is no way out. You must not cherish the impossible;

get up and go gaily downstairs. A little cold water, a little powder; this is a grief you are not permitted to indulge in.

Once again and for all time I shall go to them. If they are boisterous, spineless, unobservant, with no warmth in them, perhaps after all at some time at the bottom of their hearts they have felt, if only vaguely and vanishingly, the jealous fever which weighs like a heart; perhaps they have suffered; perhaps in looking back, when the sunshine has burst forth, they have understood that the period of their twenties was sacred. The twenties! And we, the youth, say to ourselves: wisdom is within us, the future is within us, and reason, salt, blood, the truth. It is ourselves, only ourselves. And we wish to open our hearts and say to those who pass: "Come to us, ask us. It is from us that everything can be learned; we can explain the secret things, the inner meanings, the words hidden in the folds of the body, the startling confessions that are breathed on the highways, everything that is changeful, for nothing is permanent but change; we know everything, and more than everything; we who have never loved, we know the whole of love." Perhaps *they,* the dancers downstairs, have stretched out their arms, tasted the fresh morning with their lips, felt the beating of a heart of sobs; perhaps they have once *been* their hope. I shall do what they have done; it is my turn; my time for withering will surely come too.

The farandole! Ah, they are holding each other's hands, the old folks are also joining in. "Let's enjoy ourselves!" Their faces are tense, and above their footsteps and above the avalanche of their bodies, I hear the shrill cries of the young girls.

They are leaving the drawing-room; it sounds as if they were approaching.

Don't come here. Even if it is dark in this room, even if I have wept, and even if the walls have taken on this aspect of distress, it does not mean that I can be reduced to your level.

The galop moves faster, wilder. The chain in the center is flung together in a heap, those at the end are almost scattered. The last one waves his arm in the air. The noise sickens me.

The floor of my room quivers. I will go down, I will go down to them . . .

But not yet . . .

## III

It is done . . .

How shall I bring myself to believe it, how tell myself it is true, that *it* is done, that it is an accomplished fact? And why is it that an absurd recollection obsesses me instead of the thing that has just taken place? Recollections are not considerate. They thrust themselves upon you willy-nilly. . . . It was one day when I was still little and wore my hair in a plait down my

back tied with a red ribbon. An idea struck me and set me all a-quiver, to surprise my mother by secretly filling her vase with flowers, the beautiful blue vase with the band of gold, erect on its massive pedestal like a slim thing on a throne. I was very careful, I held my breath, my movements were sedulously controlled . . . The vase toppled and made a clear, ringing sound. I can still hear it. My father came in unexpectedly. He stopped—he always was severe—took me by the shoulder, and shook me like a wind-tossed sapling. Then he dragged me to my room and on the threshold gave me a slap which sent me staggering. There was a whistling in my ears. I was drunk, dazed, completely bewildered. . . . Then he shut the door.

When I came to my senses, I ran to the glass, I don't know why, for nothing, "just to see." A wine-colored mark streaked with red was spreading over my cheek. I held the back of my hand up and felt the glow even without touching it.

It was burning, but, oddly enough, it did not hurt. I was conscious of not suffering pain, and instantly a sadness filled me, utter and sudden as a bitter flood. I didn't know why I was sad. Even now I only glimpse the reason imperfectly. Children who are simple are also more subtle than we. It was my fate to be defrauded, not to have a definite reason for shedding tears over myself, not to suffer in real earnest from an undeserved punishment, not to be able to cherish the compensation or possess the impregnable asylum, the in-

exhaustible resource that grief always is. It was when I touched my cheek which did not hurt that I threw myself on my bed crying, alone, yes really alone for the first time. And to-night it is just the same way.

I have run away from home. Here I am cast out on the street in the night. There is a fine blinding sleet; I do not know as yet where I am going to spend the night, but that doesn't hurt any more than the slap on my cheek hurt. Am I unfeeling? I push on straight ahead, the houses follow one another, the streets meet and cross, the separate shadows are only one and the same shadow. I stop now and then arrested by the consciousness of having forgotten to suffer.

I have been walking a good hour.

How penetrating the night is. An hour of utter aloneness, an hour empty and bare. Ah, that it may be so until the end. Let misery come, the unknown, humiliations, but let the truth come also. You perish trying to do without the truth . . .

That scene . . . Can the memory of it be annihilated, so that nothing remains, not even the grotesque memory of a memory?

He blazed with fury; he lashed the air first with one arm then the other; his features swelled with rage and suddenly looked youthful. . . . Now that I come to think of it, he looked exactly the same as on the day of the blue vase, only this time he did not dare to slap me. That's why he gesticulated so wildly.

I listened to him at first with an indifferent air; I was accustomed to his storms—well, the thing would soon blow over. And before my eyes the familiar scene, which the lighting up of the chandelier always placidly ushered in, was being set according to the daily ritual—the smoking tureen, which Leontine, who had entered with her padded tread, was placing on the table (she removed her red hands, finger by finger, and stole her sidewise glance at me), and the transparent play of the glasses, with iridescent stems giving back the glitter of the silver and the white sheen of the tablecloth.

Although my eyes were occupied in following intently the details of the dinner-table, a heavy travail was going on within me. A legion of slumbering desires, halting impulses, dead aspirations were rousing themselves noiselessly, almost without my consciousness. Thoughts that come in the morning when one's eyes open, "To-day! to-day," hopes dashed to the ground, deceptions, sighs—their tune rose to the surface and changed to a peal which drew me on. Yet I remained on the spot, like a beast with lowered head led by a rope.

I saw his gesture in time.

He was advancing towards me, his fist raised. Did he mean to strike? What did it matter? I was no longer in a condition to judge. A roll of thunder was shivering my inner trouble into a thousand bits, there was a flash of lightning which unloosened everything, even my tongue. I was speaking, I was speaking at last . . .

What did I say? Really, almost nothing, because in the frantic swiftness of his anger he broke in upon my first words. "Get out, get out!" He showed me his hand as if he were cursing his hand, too, forever.

The door closing behind me made a very long and very impressive sound.

I was on the landing of the staircase. No sound. The electric light cruelly exaggerated the red spiral of the carpet and touched each copper bar of the banisters with a tiny comet.

Alone.

And suddenly . . . what did it all mean? I no longer understood. That outburst of cries, that tempest, that sort of comedy, my reply . . . what . . . I went and sat down, tempted equally to laugh and to cry. I wanted to think . . .but it was already done, an almost outside force was pushing me off my hinges. "Escaped!" I was like a prisoner who sees the door left open inadvertently.

I knocked gently, my entire presence of mind returning to me in a rush. Leontine came with a pseudo-contrite expression and an air of saying "Hush!" while beneath her manner was the concentrated delight of an animal lying in wait. "They are at dinner," she whispered while I got my things together, a frock, a blouse, some toilet articles, a little money, some linen, a few books.

I closed the front door on myself, slowly, without faltering, slowly. It was done. It was not difficult.

A faint wind blew from the street below which chilled me. . . . Ah, you are trembling already, you are drawing back. That fine courage of yours, where is it? Where is your all-powerful will, and your still surer hope? . . .

It was not out of cowardice that I was trembling; but as I advanced towards my Self, street by street, house by house, through my first ordeal, I got a blunter, deeper knowledge of my Self, and a sudden fear entered my breast.

I am really not a strong person. What had been struggling in me so forcibly was not my own strength; it was simply the reaction from the *others*. A strong person would know at the very first step what mandate to derive from the power animating him; before destroying he would have built up. When a bird finds its cage open and takes flight, it does not hesitate, it has the idea of space, it spreads its wings, it knows where to fly, and how high.

I know nothing. I am setting out, that's all. Neither before nor behind me is the irresistible urge which is the start of a great career. Nor do I see close by the rising shape of my life. Nor about me is the ringing mirth of faery liberty. Nothing but a little tiredness, a little emptiness in my head, a little emptiness in my heart . . . I am not a strong person.

Good-bye, mother, good-bye to your transparent eyes, to your shoulders which will always shrug for the wrong side, good-bye to your tender lying.

You see, I am no longer faint-hearted, because

I can walk away from you forever and venture upon a vague future without a glow of eagerness. All I need is something to beckon to me. . . . There is nothing ahead of me except the quiet artery of a thoroughfare hemmed in by inky houses and the darkness, which melts away at the panes of the street-lamps and makes them dance and quiver below and twinkle like eyes at the top. Liberty has the taste of fog. . . .

## BOARDING-HOUSE

Shall I cross this unfriendly threshold covered with a mangy rug? I should so much like to stop walking and go to sleep. Shall I choose this house which exhales the smell of a cellar, this gloomy shelter, these dingy walls? Shall I . . .

Come on, fate is everywhere. This is the place I must enter.

## IV

I have found work . . .

A fortnight, a hundred hopes, a fortnight . . . The unfriendly atmosphere of stiff faces. "The position is filled." Stairs mounted four steps at a time, then descended gravely, catechisms begun with questions that embarrass and so often ending with questions that make you blush. Then one

fine day—by what magic?—the position is not filled, and you answer yes to everything required; the sky is clear, you will start to-morrow.

I have not drained to its dregs the joy there is in working at my nondescript job from morning until evening. To work for your bread, to feel dignified and straight. You cannot talk, to be sure, but at least you do not lie, you are in repose, you let the waves of your being pile up, and every evening you return to a docile home, where the silence is always nigh to flowering . . .

The boarding-house, however, is not hospitable; you never satisfy your hunger, and my narrow room with its threadbare carpet and mouldy ceiling is like a badly kept cage. But it's Sunday morning and I have undertaken to make it inviting.

A handkerchief twisted about my hair, a white blouse and bare arms . . . By persisting and rubbing again, by chasing the dust, by trying a place for the books twenty times over, by pushing the chairs about, by scraping away the layers of encrusted filth, I am bound to triumph. To judge of the effect, I stop several times and perch on the tattered arm of the red-flowered armchair; the place looks better already. But to it again!

No pictures, no ornaments. I have taken down the sentimental prints hypocritically concealing the scars of the wall-paper. Nothing but the bare room and the high window with its dim panes.

The bed of a doubtful mahogany burrows into the bashful retreat of the alcove. The wardrobe

would wabble if it were not secured by a thick rope tied to the rosette on the front. The rosette is typical of a curious character that the room has for all its dinginess. There was an attempt to decorate with a profusion of flowers. Flowers everywhere, spread broadcast over the walls, cutting off the corners of the wash-boards, and trailing their sallow procession in a border around the top of the walls. They are even woven into the stuff on the back of the armchair, they appear almost effaced in the maroon-colored linoleum, and ravelled out and faded in the cretonne curtains . . . In this cemetery, the sweet violets blooming on my table have a sensual, almost insolent splendor; their petals look red.

For all its bareness, my room radiates light; the meagre sunlight shines in through the window and is already transfiguring the place; I feel comfortable in it.

Oftener and oftener I ask myself what is my reason for existence, my true, my sole destiny. Doubtless one must sleep in a room for a long time before encountering the soul that prepares itself there.

I am, I know, like a person who wants to build a big house without having a site or materials, who says nevertheless: "No, not this site, no, not this material." But this is of no importance, I realize. Once you have submitted to the wholesome discipline enjoined by poverty, you receive in return energetic muscles and a patient outlook.

I wait; and no longer having any need to complain or criticize, I wait with a smile. Everything is simpler than one thinks, and everything is easier, and it seems to me that—

Someone is knocking at the door.

"May I come in?"

The landlady, Mme. Noël.

Mme. Noel is more of an imp than a woman. She has the figure, the voice, and the darting roguishness of a slim young thing of twelve.

When I was getting settled the first morning, I suddenly heard her insect-step close by—I had left my door open—and without giving me time to draw back, she besieged me with questions:

"How old do you think I am?"

"I don't know."

"Guess anything."

"Thirty-four . . . thirty-three . . . thirty."

On looking at her closely a few seconds, it seemed to me she was probably forty.

"Fifty-two, my dear!" To convince me of her age she stuck her finger under a slab of hair waved and dyed red and actually exposed an abundance of fading white hair.

Her face was no bigger than a fist, with cheeks like baked apples. Her shrewd naked eyes pried about. She came farther into the room and perched lightly on one of my rickety pieces of furniture, balancing it with her body. Then she began to unfold the story of her life, rummaging, unpacking, digging it up by huge armfuls: her husband, her lover, and then another, a painter she

adored. The first one came back. . . . Love, adventures. . . . So it is possible to speak about your love and adventures?

Before leaving me—I was quite dazed; which must have been evident—lowering her voice a little:

"*He* is so good . . . I myself am not crazy about him, but *he* loves me so . . ."

"He?"

"The boarding-house—it is not only for what it pays, you understand. It's for *the company!*"

"The company?"

With the springy elegance of a cat, her tapering elbows breaking the evenness of her outline, Mme. Noël slid on to the bed. The mattress reared up, the coverings billowed, the pillow, struck slantwise, was about to fall. But she needed so little room, and she carefully patted the hollow she made for herself.

"Well, is there nothing you want? . . . Ah, these young things—a handkerchief round their heads and they still look pretty."

Instinctively I pulled off my handkerchief. I stammered: "To keep off the dust" and—what could I do to make her go?—I smiled awkwardly.

"Oh, by the way, I came near forgetting to tell you. If . . . you want to receive in your room . . . after all, what of it? You surely have somebody . . . It's just between us women. A beautiful girl like you, it would be a shame . . . You won't be bashful, will you? To me love is sacred. And you will tell your little secrets to

Mme. Noël? I have told you mine. Only of course you will be careful not to make any noise. I say this on account of the Russians in the next room. They used to receive swarms of people up to all hours. The rumpus! I tell you, I put a stop to it. But you, you're different. I liked you from the start."

I had to answer, I was going to answer . . . but my tongue was dry with confusion. Besides, how edge a word in? There she was back at her huge pile of love stories. She even tried to pump me, lifting and lowering her powdered little nose; one scrap of information she set aside for use presently. At last she disappeared trippingly with a pointed *au revoir* which crisped the hide of her cheeks.

An odor of imitation white lilac persists, but so much sunshine streams in through the open window, so many quickening exhalations that the odor will soon be dissipated.

Love . . . yes . . .

Perhaps by listening hard to the inner voice you may get to let it speak out loud. If I give in to this habit, I want to hear myself say: "I do not like love." I even want to add: "Keep it away," because love seems to be an outside force which smites or spares without your having deserved or banished it.

I have seen too many couples in which the man is nothing but a craving for conquest, the woman nothing, absolutely nothing, but a need to be conquered. I have seen too many who have not been

visited by grace and have damned themselves to mutual ruin. A veritable attack and a semblance of defence. I have seen what is taken for love.

I have seen women steeped in trickery; the wilier they were the more love surrounded them. I have seen the heavy looks of men set about everywhere like traps . . . I am worth nothing as yet, but my sound heart—I refuse it. And I say it quite low to exorcise the invisible danger: I do not like love.

"To me love is sacred . . ."

I understand fully what those small, naked, prying eyes were glorifying. And in the adventurous life of those eyes I see neither more nor fewer blemishes and lies than in the eyes of the young girls. Neither more nor fewer. At moments there even flashed in those eyes sparks, reflections, gleams . . .

A cloud is darkening the window; my room is obliterated.

But if by leaning forward and boldly offering my face to the sun and stretching out further, I could take in all his golden bounty and all his light?

I withdraw hastily from the springtime window because when a gentle flame ran over my wrist I became aware of lack of dignity: my untidy hair, the dust on me, the disorderly room.

Since the sun lives, since I long for it, love must exist. I shall find the proof of it. Quickly, my Sunday frock, order about me, flowers . . .

Keep it far away from me. I do not feel I am ready . . .

## V

Trude's twenty-fourth birthday. Twenty-four candles around the monster of a cake. Trude announces that Edda, the youngest of us, is to light the candles when we're ready for the toasts and the dessert.

I lent my vases, my old red-flowered armchair, and my draperies. This morning when the preparations were completed and their voices in triple unison leapt to me: "Come and look!" I was in the room in three bounds like an answering echo.

It really looked nice. Who would have recognized Clara's impossible room? Heavy ropes of foliage dotted with roses festooned the walls, my beautiful blue stuff entirely hid the toilet-table, flowers covered the mantelpiece and starred the corners of the mirror; and the table covered with a white cloth was gay with pyramids of fruit.

Now the guests are all here except Markowitch, who said beforehand he would be late. "I am not going to seat you," Clara cries to them above the rising hubbub. "Choose your own places." And she turns her back to give the last touches to the table. Her heavy braided knot hangs low on the nape of her neck. In spite of the two spreading wings of her skirt at her waist line she looks thinner than ever in her greenish dress.

Someone glides up behind her, a pink arm for an instant twines about her waist. "Clara, can I help?" She turns round. Dahlia.

Dahlia is not an ordinary creature; she is no one; she is *the young girl.* But that really is saying nothing. Juliet and Miranda are dead; our times are not made for a creature of the dawn who is supposed to be finer than the promise of herself, but who is already herself; who is supposed not to be ignorant, who is pure and who, in order to love, does not await love.

Dahlia comes of another age; she comes from the country of fjords and legends. Her father was exiled, she wanted to go with him, they had no money; they made almost the whole journey on foot. One evening when their heavy limbs would carry them no further, they were stranded in a squalid quarter on the outskirts of Paris. They took a room . . . The next day the man did not get up. And since then Dahlia has bowed her head to the yoke and works all day long for a poor monthly wage in an office where the walls press upon her like a vice. "It's to keep up my father's spirits," she said with a shake of her head when I saw her the second time.

I shall never forget the first time. I had come in a little later than usual, and probably more tired, too. I did not even think of lighting the lamp, the dusk was unreal . . . heavens! . . . a vision took shape between the threshold and the shadows, scarcely daring . . . There was a brow set in pale gold, the delicate blur of a face, eyes

like a thousand forget-me-nots; between two young arms the strait, retiring modesty of the angels, and their light movements also. She drew nearer. "We have made a cake, the sort we make at home, let's divide." She disappeared. Her present remained behind on my table. . . .

In her thin linen dress this evening, with a whiff of paradise about her, Dahlia seems to be enveloped in a pink illumination. She smiles on everybody as one must smile at happiness when one catches a glimpse of it.

"Your beautiful red dress," she assures Trude, gently clasping the soft spindles of her hands.

How can Trude remain simple and genuinely Puritanical beneath her trappings of beaded crimson plush and cuirass of some hodgepodge of gold caught in at the hips. I fancy she is too simple for finery to add to her personality. Real or imitation the fineries give way; it is she who adorns them. Whatever she wears is sanctified and comes to resemble her, everything except her threefold name, Gertrude, Trude, Trudel.

She has the peculiar brilliance of the Russians, sombre, subterranean, almost undefinable. Whatever she does, whether she laughs, or is excited, or talks with fire of ordinary things, she always has a finger lifted in the air and her wide gaze raised Christ-like. She has the mouth of an evangelist. Her irises set in clear white have glints of jet. She wears the glossy foliage of her black locks straight back from her forehead, an intense forehead crowning her like a diadem . . .

What other woman would dare the supreme immodesty of displaying a bare forehead? What woman would gain by doing it? The strange thing is, Trude is beautiful only by a kind of miracle; the least little bit more, and her cheeks would stick out over the cheekbones of a Tartar; the least little bit less, and her nose would be obliterated. The lakes of her eyes tranquilly conceal the raging waves in their depths. How many, by a shade of ill-luck, have escaped beauty? Trude, by a miracle, has escaped ugliness.

Mania, her sister, so different with her agile, insinuating body, lovingly fingers the presents. "You have not seen everything, Trude. Do come." Books, prints, china, and elegant embroidered articles—pretty things all from poor people who will soon be setting out on foot in the darkness for their distant lodgings in order to save carfare. For we are all as poor as poor can be. Except Markowitch. Mania told me he was "immensely rich," had at least two hundred dollars a month spending money.

It is hard to say whether it is our poverty that creates this comradeship among us. You come in and you feel at ease, you feel *good,* you love all of them, even Lonnie, the little Swiss with cheeks lacquered with rouge, and even Michael with his tight compressed nose peaking out of the profile of a hen—Michael perhaps more than the others.

So much the worse for Markovitch: we are going to begin. The hubbub dies down a little; everyone finds a place, two on the same chair, some

on the bed, a good many on the floor, young men, young girls holding each other's hands, so close together, so pure, that I can still not accustom myself . . .

"It is your turn, Mania."

A song, liquid, then fiery, comes from among the reeds and carries you far off—down there—to those wild plains chiseled by the wind where the streams, driven to the surface and threshed by their rocky beds, have the fury of torrents. What a potency of attention on these serious faces!

Isn't that Markovitch?

"Come in!"

With his hardened features wrought in granite he, too, is a force. His bulbous eyes search the gathering and find what they are looking for . . . Dahlia raises her head, blushes, and is veiled in delicate purple up to the golden edge of her hair. She is aware of the love of this great spoilt boy; we are all aware of it; but she has refused to be his wife because she does not love him. He will not speak of it again; nevertheless they continue to meet straightforwardly. With a free, rounded movement of her arms, like the handles of an amphora, she points to a vacant place beside her. "Here." Then in dismay: "Don't make a noise."

Prikoff is telling of a childhood recollection. You seem to see him as both the fantastic gnome and the father in the tale. You see huts assailed by icy blizzards, hazy visions of bodies blue with

cold, love of *somewhere else* . . . Despite his huge jaw and unkempt mass of hair, what benignity, mildness, and gentleness. It is as though he were talking to little children gathered close about him.

Is time passing? No one notices it, we have forgotten it. Time escapes youth gathered together and bound in a sheaf; it escapes Clara's bosom from which a plaintive *lied* is rising, while the hungry hands around Dahlia, who is doling out the manna, make time tarry. A real poor folk's supper, the supper of persons who are hungry at all hours. Thick slices of rare meat on bread, solid pastry, big bright fruit. One should see these robust young girls munching even the meat.

How fond I am of them all! Among them I feel for the first time what the human voice really is; for the first time feel the warmth which is shared and communicated from being to being, which makes of a single entity a group of entities, of a field of separate ears of corn the human harvest.

I wouldn't know how to choose among them. But one of the young men might slightly frighten and disconcert me; his accent might seem barbarous. My trim dress, my too-dainty shoes, and my fluffy blouses, all the things that constitute my element, might cause me to feel compunction. And maybe too I might feel ashamed of the hour I spend every morning anxiously pressed close to the glass as if I were begging myself to be beautiful.

I should have the same feeling on behalf of the girls as for myself; at bottom I do not discriminate between men and women. I should go even further. If friendship drew me to one of them, my compunction would change to grief. Really, can one forgive Clara her over-trimmed dress conceived in a nightmare? Can one forgive all of them their down-at-heel shoes, the lack of care and regard for others that they show in their appearance?

Should I adjust my days with no ups and downs in them to their volcanic days? "What's it all coming to?" cries Trude sometimes, and throws herself on her bed sobbing and losing herself in her emotions. Time passes and dies—one day, two days—suddenly she rises. She has forgotten her office, her meals, everything. She leans her forehead against the window-pane, and her tears flow bitterly.

If we became intimate, would they forgive me my neat room, my punctuality, my scrupulous adherence to rule and system, my moderation in everything? In the first days of our being neighbors they used to say: "You know, the little Frenchwoman who always comes and goes at the same time and makes so little noise and uses powder?" That quite described me.

This evening of the reunion of these serious creatures runs on by leaps and bounds and rises to a pitch by fits and starts. There is a glowing dewiness about Dahlia; Markovitch follows her with the green pupils of his bulbous eyes. And

all of a sudden the whole company is fired at the same time. Without expecting to they burst into song—who threw the spark?—and the room lights up like a hearth all aglow with voices. . . .

Fifteen flames mingled, but only a single flame. It is a song that rages and mounts higher, and jerks and jolts, and is convulsed with raucous shouts, in which the joy becomes frenetic and the laughter has a shudder in it. They bring to their singing the fervor and the earnestness of application that they bring to everything.

I am sitting in the retreat of the little chimney-piece hidden from their eyes, and I should like to ask their forgiveness for not knowing their fervid song and not being in harmony with them. I should like to ask pardon of all of them for everything.

I should like to . . . I should like to . . .

Breathes there a human being on earth who has nothing to forgive, whom one has nothing to forgive? . . .

To be with him, his equal, close to him, face to face with him, *and alone with one.*

## VI

The two Loiseaus and I were sitting in their dining-room, a narrow rectangle with waxed floor and small straw mats here and there exactly like a convent parlor.

The evening—a dark evening out of doors—

encompassed the walls with mystery. The darker it grew the less we felt like getting up and lighting the lamp. Why bother after all? There was a whole grate full of flames. They leaped and emitted a lively red crackling, shot forth luminous circles, hung high in the hearth, dancing tongues of fire, orange-colored mountain crests, aigrettes of blue light, grimaces of demons . . . whirlpools . . . fairyland . . . crash and collapse . . . foolery . . .

All of us felt drowsy, each imprisoned in his own silence. The shadows quivered gently above our shoulders. The silence, a trifle stagnant emanating from the three of us, seemed to be compressed up under the toned-down white of the ceiling.

I was curled up in front of the hearth, my eyes at the mercy of the glowing surge, my chin thrust forward. A languid sense of well-being spread all around, played over the hollow of your arms, and padded the nape of your neck: you thought of nothing.

The two Loiseaus are people who know how to be silent; you spend Friday evening with them, and everything—except themselves—tells you that they are pleased with the presence that makes three silhouettes dance in the room.

They are not very old, but there's no denying they *are* old bachelors, because in their company you don't feel the torturing constraint and embarrassment which the *others* make you feel because you're a woman.

When you come, they hold out their hands good-naturedly. Rémy, the great big patient Rémy, takes my hat, my gloves rolled into a ball, and my cloak. He steps on my cloak and is vaguely alarmed. This adds to his confusion, and when he hangs my things on the rack in the hall he is so awkward in his carefulness that my hat rolls to the ground. We sit down and talk of the office —you cannot start by not talking—and when every topic is exhausted, I suggest making tea, a suggestion well worth the making just to rouse the gourmand look in the old boys' eyes. "Oh yes, some tea." You can almost hear them purr.

I busy myself with an ease become superlative. It is possible that for an instant I find myself a woman again between two attentive men, converted into the household goddess—she who performs the rites and dispenses the food and offers the milk, just a thimbleful, while the men's eyes are upon her as she bends over the cups. This constrains my movements and makes me tread more lightly and mince my steps. I scarcely displace the shadows.

My two old friends!

Rémy pursues his reading with a frank absorption which dominates his whole body. His heavy forehead bulges, his clenched fists form two undefined cubes on the page. Migo (when I look at him I call him Migo, too), rolls his cigarette. This evening he is inclined to be talkative. He rubs up his memory:

"The first day you came to the office what a timid manner you had."

The recollections play upon an irresistible note. Rémy emerges from his corner, his good blue eyes rising to the bait; a vision hung on a thread, persons long faded. And it must be confessed that all three of us let ourselves be captured; the same smile widens our features.

The door-bell rings . . . Yes, it rang.

The triple peal sends our heads apart. Rémy rises, hostile and resigned. He is always the one to open the door.

Waiting in every circumstance, even when nothing is at stake, is painful. The spirit recoils and contracts, and space is left for thoughts of an inevitable misfortune and for the twinkling vision of the things which disappear. In a single instant life can completely change its aspect. . . .

A sweeping draught. It brings in the voice of a young man. I want to leave. The two Loiseaus hover about him. "What a surprise! How nice!" They rub their hands. "Come in and sit down!"

It is too late to leave; the stranger is already bowing to me, and the mingled exclamations pretty well hide my stammering. I am so ashamed of myself for stammering.

The newcomer seats himself near the fire on the little black chair to the right of Migo. He wants the lamp to stay unlighted. But it is no longer the same. Our silence has been routed, and the languor, and the warmth also . . .

I am in a good position to observe him. How old? Thirty-four, thirty-five perhaps. Is he really handsome? Hard to say. He is too dark. His

face is strongly chiseled, his cheeks sunken, his forehead hard as a hammer. The long line of his jaw lends refinement to his countenance, which is lit by eyes fearlessly open, in which the gray, in spots, seems steeped in phosphorous. His gestures are repressed and rather commanding. He talks little, but when he does talk his fire contrasts with the rarity of his words, gives them value, makes them seem to issue all alive from the bowels of the earth, while he sits with his body upright, as if at a distance, the flicker from the hearth enamelling, then removing, the burnished black of his hair . . . I bethink myself: we have not yet had tea. I hope it will be just right this evening.

One by one I take out of their hiding-place the cups with the gold lines, the lovely ones, the only embroidered tea-cloth, the teapot with the golden spout, and the flowers, wan in the night. I set the luxury of these things on the table. With my head shrouded in the light-dark and my shoulders swathed in a fleece of shadow, how good it is to be among them, screened by my movements, not sitting but standing so that I can look upon the happy trio. Him especially. For alongside of him, who hardly speaks, the two Loiseaus, beaming and voluble, seem suddenly tame and stunted.

A pleasant sight, quite new to me, this group of three faces on which a common childhood springs to life, fond joys shared in the past, and names that are no more. They have almost forgotten that a woman is present. This reassures me.

But if *he,* when he raises his eyes and sees me, is going to remember I am a woman and turn to me too civilly and kindle the usual warfare under the bland honey of the customary phrases! No . . . not he . . . not this man. He is so frank and so fine with his two friends; what he says is so right, and he speaks so directly, without straining for effect. No, not he.

I offer each of them a trembling cup which they accept without trembling. Then I quickly withdraw again to the protecting shadow where my place is hollowed out, to listen to this amazing presence which my heart scans.

He has spoken to me.

He has spoken to me as never yet a man has spoken: without trying to see or please me, without any ulterior thoughts, just as he speaks to the two Loiseaus, probably just as he speaks to himself when alone. It does happen, then, that from the depths of simple obscurity, unexpectedly, one hears real words, real naked words from a man?

I answer in the same good faith, I no longer feel any fear or the need for self-defence. I feel a delight which helps me. And the perfume of the words that rises from the four of us—it is upon him I bestow it.

From the embers comes a live heat which settles on your cheekbones; your neck unconsciously stretches towards the red point where the conversation, which also crackles and sparkles, rests its centre. This stranger close to me seems like a

king leaning over the edge of a fountain; the light carves his smile and courts that familiar brow . . . Is he still a stranger?

But suddenly, what time is it? Twenty past eleven! Time to go. Yes, yes, I must go.

At the shock which brings me to my feet the whole group breaks up. They discuss who is to see me home, and I have to refuse three offers at the same time.

Give me your brotherly hands, I want to go home by myself. And you, turn upon me those eyes so different from other men's eyes.

As I go down the stairs the fidgety advice repeated a hundred times, which Rémy hurls at me over the banisters every Friday, descends upon my head. "Don't walk so fast, look where you're going." The last scraps of warning roll like billiard balls. Rémy, old friend, have no fear, go in again. I am carrying away an immense wonder. It is hurrying me along in its round. I want to dance, to cry . . .

Rémy's voice is cut off abruptly, along with the cone of light in which the steps reeled.

On the street . . . a narrow, formidable street, full of a palpable, limpid night.

Whither goes the volatile sky pursued by the pale flock of clouds? Whither go those grand transports which seize and overwhelm you? Here below there is a man honest in his voice, straightforward in his look, a brotherly man. And I have met him!

## VII

For the first time I have spoken about myself to a living being. Not so much in words or details or episodes as in the profound desire to open up the depths of my soul and finally give a true view of it.

To talk of oneself! That enigmatic, incomplete, elusive, warm thing, tossed by conflicting currents, adding to itself constantly, this thing that one *is*. To say what it is! . . . To tell of it with modest lips, with lids raised, with voice sure, with silence . . .

I should never have believed in the possibility of such a boon. And in the first minutes of our being together on Sunday, I still did not know of the possibility.

Two weeks after the Friday at the Loiseaus', I was stamping my feet with the cold in the queue of people waiting at the little door of the theatre to buy the two-franc seats. I happened to turn and was mechanically studying the faces—there he stood eight or nine persons away . . .

My delighted gaze rested upon him so hard that his head turned compliantly. He saw me, his face lighted up. The crowd was interested, the women stared with their unabashed curiosity, the men joked, but not one of them, you may be sure, was willing to budge. Through the interstices between the hats, our cheeks glowing with the

wind, we exchanged greetings, and I divined rather than heard that he wanted to see me. It was at that moment that I felt as if I were flinging myself overboard.

"Next Sunday at my house if you like?"

A strange current was carrying me away. Certain prejudices must be deep-rooted. What was so extraordinary about receiving him in my room? The fact that I took the initiative of inviting him seemed to be trumpeted to the four quarters of the globe; and when his answer came calm and natural, I couldn't continue to face him; I had to hide my burning ears up against the old gentleman in the greatcoat, who fastened his mocking persistent faun's gaze upon me. During the concert I felt by turns as if I had committed a crime and a glorious feat.

"Two o'clock," I had called to him.

I was up early in the morning, and by ten minutes to two everything was ready. The flowers and foliage bought at market had had time to freshen up and expand. The petals of the anemones, shut up like a tight case in the morning, were spreading in a crown around the big pompoms of black pistils. The bed was successfully disguised by a draped covering, and my room, all polished and groomed, shone like a jewel. It looked really homelike. At the last moment I put on my dress of white woollen stuff, the one with the cord girdle and elbow sleeves. The hardest task was the arranging of my hair. Not to look untidy with a fiery mop of a head, yet to be a little beau-

tiful, oh joy, beautiful, to please him. I set-to furiously on the image in the looking-glass.

Five minutes to two. Three little raps, three moments of insensibility, three echoes.

My hand trembled slightly as I held it out to him, and when his gaze travelled over me, an amazing sense of shame seized and chilled me. I promptly hid my arms in my scarf. But my terror was quickly dissipated. He conveyed the lofty ease of people of perfect simplicity. He was there with all his manly gravity, all his attention, and his good smile imparting a sense of security. I felt his calm transfuse itself into me.

We sat down. I no longer know how we began or by what avenue of conversation he came to tell me of his crushed childhood, his needy youth, his mother, his studies, the present career he had chosen for himself. . . . I listened; I followed him from year to year, from picture to picture, from place to place; and within me a larger and larger void was filling up with hopes and thoughts that seemed to have dwelt there always.

What a flood of sweetness, what warmth and space, and what . . . I hardly breathed . . .

"Your turn . . ."

He was sitting on my little chair near the window with his back partly to the light. From the depths of the armchair, the white fleece of my scarf looping at my feet, I saw the quality of his gaze.

My story was not so straight and consecutive. Here and there I lost my way and had to stop,

with nothing more to say. Nevertheless, insight into me kindled under his eyes, we advanced together as happy and at as even a pace as if we were holding each other's hands; and my flimsy past assumed a little weight.

We spoke of love—you always speak of love when you talk about yourself—but without distinguishing it from ourselves. Who can say what love is? Love is I, it is he. On the day when I shall love, love will be changed and will resemble me and will no longer be that love of which one speaks in general. It will be I—I simply stirred up.

When we were silent under the influence of the slack atmosphere of the room, we two souls at the same pitch, my gaze plunged in the creamy muslin of the curtains, I knew he found me beautiful. I realized I was waiting for him to say so. I would have hugged his words, I should have liked to see them come from his lips without covetousness, I should have wanted them to be nothing but my craving for beauty . . .

I believe I closed my eyes. A loving alliance took place between my visible body and my hidden being. I was no longer divided against myself. Thanks to him . . .

How long did we remain that way, grave and smiling, opposite each other? I cannot tell exactly . . .

The flowers on the table with widespread petals held out their black hearts to us. A gentle pearl-gray breeze was stirring the curtains.

He is gone, is he? His going made no break or clash and left no sense of finality. I had scarcely felt him take my hand when he released it, the doorway was empty. I returned to the empty armchair in the room ennobled by both his absence and his presence, my arms weighed down and my spirits in eclipse. . . .

Who is speaking? Who is there?

Mme. Noël, the live puppet, is sticking her painted head in at the door; the thread of light holds it as in a snare. She *here* at this moment! . . . One impatient start and I go over to her. "My compliments, a handsome fellow!" This time it is too much. "Such looks, such eyes! Good for you!" Letting out a chain of cackles, the little floury face retreats under cover, the streak of light narrows, gilds the frame of the door, and dissolves in the shadow.

Alone . . . But am I still alone?

The cold window-pane refreshes my forehead. The street lounges lazily in its Sunday repose, and the room into which I turn back embraces a fateful, solemn evening; its ripe perfume rises like incense, the flower-decked mantelpiece resembles an altar beneath a cluster of tapers.

I no longer know . . . I no longer know . . .

## VIII

He is often late. I have noticed that I am almost invariably the one to have to wait. Work in his office ends at the same time as mine, but the two places are at a distance from each other, and it always seems a long time before I see him coming.

The first minutes go by unheeded because the seven o'clock outpouring streams by where I post myself on the sidewalk. No signal is given. At a mysterious order and at a given moment a black wave foams and contracts at the exit, and as in greeting to the open light sends up a thousand exclamations, which make one long cry of relief.

This evening it is still light, and the escaping crowd is not inclined to hurry. The sluggishness of the air, the sonorousness, the droning, the motley street . . . the crowd condenses and remains coagulated on one spot. Is it ever going to decide to pass on?

When the day's work is over, you come back to the brilliant world marvelling at the holiday sky, and blinking . . . Summer is knocking at the window . . . it does you good to be standing on your legs expanding your lungs. One group attracts you. They all look like wags, their conversation fascinates; if you were to listen to them, you would remain standing there with your hands in your pockets. But you are being awaited at

home, and the circle almost as soon as formed breaks up with casual farewells flung over the shoulder.

When the women hurry along, rain or shine, it is in the subconscious urge to show themselves to everyone. Those who swelled the hubbub a little while ago with jostling elbows and foreheads set like a ram's—"get a move on you!"—are the first to display their pronounced busts and the slowest to walk away with chirps and winged signs and nods and a swaying of sinuous backs.

The street is emptied. Some women still pace up and down the block. They are waiting for someone too.

There he is!

From the busy far-end of the street, across the eddies of people, nothing to tell me it is he but the shape of his hat. Again I feel the security that his appearance always brings.

His tall figure hemmed in by a group detaches itself, grows bigger, and becomes more recognizable step by step. I go to meet him, slowly, smiling despite myself as he hurries, and when our hands touch, my heart breaks into bloom . . . An overwhelming instant . . . a soft ecstasy . . . fusion . . . And every evening it is as if I had never found him . . .

Let us go by the boulevards. The weather is so lovely, we have plenty of time.

Our questions tumble over one another, clear away bothersome trifles, do not even wait for answers, take everything for granted—what hap-

pened during the day, all the details, everything, and more than everything.

As a matter of fact, what we listen to is our footsteps. We keep even pace, our tread makes the same sound. A discovery flooding the heart—it is a single step that is carrying us along.

We walk side by side, and the space between us does not divide us. We are followed and preceded by a whole procession of couples moving with a slowness strangely rhythmic which leaves a wake behind.

We have told everything, everything we know, and everything we are. It is not a question of being alike in order to be comrades, of springing from the same roots or having drunk from the same source. The thing is, for each to serve the truth which the other lives with the same heart as his own, different truth.

No, it is not a question of being alike. Haven't I observed a hundred times that we are very different? How can one wish it otherwise? How conceive that we whose age is not the same, whose bodies are so different, whose characters are well-defined, and whose careers are opposite should respond to the same influences? Why, each of us responds to the veriest trifles according to his own temperament . . . Does he perceive as I do this street, the flower-beds of the big cafés, the crowd with glowing eyes, the gritty dust? Is this instant the same instant to him? I know it is not . . .

A block. How shall we get through? The cross-

ing of the huge thoroughfares, with its din, its black swarming thousands, dashing motors, clanging of bells, tooting of horns, discharges its mechanical eruption upon the city. Let us run. He has slipped his strong arm under mine; we take long joyous strides and finally land in peaceful territory out of breath and radiant.

Here at last is a boulevard where one can breathe, then an old countrified street where silence has nested. We plunge into its tranquillity.

But . . . I hadn't noticed—the red rises to my cheeks—his arm is still under my arm, confident, natural. How is it that it never occurred to me that it should always be so?

Shall I dare to tell him how sweet it is to feel him so close to me, our two lives joined, our two souls welded—how *necessary* it is to me?

Feelings depart quickly, and joy too. I can scarcely follow my feelings and my joy. When my heart has slowed down, yes, *I* will speak to *him*, I shall feel his breath on my voice, his warmth against my breast. And I shall obey this visible will which comes running to me, springing from the smiling house-fronts, falling from the sky padded with pink.

We are drawing near to my lodgings.

Still this street, where the gracious wind dances for its own pleasure. A few moments, and we shall be leaving each other.

Leaving each other . . . ?

Ah, I know now what to say. I know what the

will of a little while ago wanted, and my life and his life. I am going to find the words . . .

"Listen. I have been thinking. Don't let us part again. Never. It is I who am asking you. Let us live together . . . I cannot say anything else, that sums up everything, it is everything, to live together. Is it love? . . . I don't know yet . . . but I know we ought to live together, and you, you know it too."

My voice is thick and has the taste of tears; it scrapes in my dry throat, it won't come out. He takes my two hands, draws me close to him, his gaze caressing my eyes which strain to escape. With his body he supports my rigid, awkward body, which struggles hard to remain upright and does nothing but tremble.

The street has disappeared, the sound of the universe, the setting sun which in a golden glory celebrates our sacred betrothal.

From under my closed eyelids I no longer perceive anything but a heavy black pendulum with impetuous strokes, which beats against my breast and henceforth regulates our joint existences . . .

## IX

My family was exultant.

Behold me returned to "proper" life, from which I had so long been absent, by the massive trap-door of marriage . . . I took on a value

in their reassured eyes, I became a somebody, and in the ardor of the first moment they had the impression that they completely forgave me.

They were exultant. They sent a charming gown to my lodgings and apprised me that a big dinner was being arranged to give my future husband the chance to become acquainted. In spite of my repugnance I was caught in the cog-wheels. The joy of seeing my mother again made me pass over everything indulgently.

It was she who ruined the whole business. Could I not see her disdainful attitude towards a man's poverty, her terrorized submission to the world's judgment? "You know, you are supposed to be coming back from England, we have even given details, don't contradict us . . ." And the quasi-respect with which she encompassed me because of the authority with which marriage crowns a daughter!

There certainly was enough to frighten one. Their rejoicing smelled of revenge. What stifling quality, I wonder, can marriage have? What oppression, what defeats, what chains await me? Am I going to prison?

But when I turn towards *him* and bathe my sight in the serene waters of his eyes, I recover my assurance and soar with him again. For them, it is clear, marriage is an irrevocable finality, a tight ring, the oppression of that wild, free instinct which you breathe out with your breath. To us marriage is only a word.

Throughout the dinner time stood still, each

second stagnated and told a lie. And something indefinably foul and poisonous rose from their attitude. Sometimes I felt as if I had never quitted this hypocritical spot and this gilded furniture. I held aloof from him in apparent indifference, but really to save our innocent love from their profane eyes.

They left us alone for a moment, and that moment is the one thing in the whole evening of which I retain a clear picture although scarcely a week has passed since then. In saying we were alone I am not quite accurate. A law forbade that young people should be left alone together for a single instant. My sister and her big boy of a fiancé were near us; we were not quite sure which couple had been put in custody of the other.

With arms fondly entwined about each other's waists they began to kiss and hug. She held up her lips and uncoiled the serpent of her body tantalizingly. When they were a little tired and their mouths blown, I heard a panting sentence which ended with: "You will love me always?" "Of course, always," he murmured in her ear.

I blushed. Not from offended modesty, but he and I—we had never dreamed of such vows. They seemed silly to me. How can one swear to love forever and say to a man: "Unto all eternity I shall be the most beautiful, the only one in your heart"? *Always, forever*, words which life at every turn refutes, how is it that a live heart would not give them the lie?

I must have looked a little haggard. My sister

turning round saw that we sat apart with a gloomy, distant manner. The same thought was in his mind.

"Aren't they cold for lovers?" . . . By way of reply to her own question, she kissed her fiancé.

## X

After fingering the deposit the old pot-bellied concierge livened up. "Money from lovers isn't mere money, it means good luck."

When he came back unexpectedly and with a paternal burr in his voice offered us "a little candle-end to take the measurements with; so often the ladies and gentlemen forget," it was chiefly to surprise us in an embrace, or some laughing dispute interlarded with kisses.

The apartment of three adjoining rooms like three cells in a honeycomb is very nice. It must be bright in summer, the stairs are kept clean, the courtyard is cool and fresh with its green lane of flower-pots. Our windows look right out on the top of the tree. A mighty rare thing, a tree in Paris. Spring mornings we shall be awakened by a fusillade of bird songs.

So this is where we shall live. These rooms, in which the atmosphere seems low and cramped and the floor is all splintered, are to serve us as domain and empire; these walls are to be our horizon.

When I was a child and lay tucked in bed, I used to dream of "being grown up." . . . Then when I was fifteen I'd say to myself "later on" so as to hear another troubling, forbidden word echo in my ears. And now my confused dreams are come to attend me here . . . So here is the end of the story; it is all here, the mirage.

Only yesterday the sole reason for the existence of this place was a jaundiced, weather-beaten sign on the street. . . . And now our double life has found its temple, chosen its setting, and fixed upon its rallying point.

So this is the place we shall call "home." When the rain beats down out of doors and a wrecking wind blows, this will be our unchanging harbor. Whenever we make a new friend and we have told him everything and there are still more things to tell, we shall welcome him across this threshold and within these walls and let him see our ultimate selves. And when the golden May daylight rouses you from bed and sends you running to the window to feel its radiant stroke on your cheek and vague longings take possession of you, it will be the fastenings of this window which will turn to let in the breath of the dawn.

The little dining-room seems somewhat less desolate than the other wan rooms. The ceiling still bears the mark of the hanging-lamp as a sign of where the kindly light came from; a border of red arabesques runs round the top of the walls, and the fireplace of russet imitation marble with

its pitted traces from invisible fingers of flame makes you feel as though the grate were still warm.

The kitchen is so tiny and so like a toy that there's not a thing in it, not even an old knife left behind through oversight. In spite of the floor with tiles missing like teeth from a mouth, the sink with dried-up pores, the stove downy with rust, it is the one room that doesn't seem to be crying for help. It needs only a glimmer in the stove and savory smells to give it life.

This is the moment to look life in the face—the real life, not the one people talk about. Until now our love has rested merely upon a foundation of clay. It has been facile, scarcely tangible. I perceive it is a love to be.

Now our love must be confronted with its kingdom, must have its boundaries and landmarks fixed, must be asked to shine in truth and be forced to the test. Let our love speak and inspire us. Later, when we shall have furniture around us, like words already spoken, we shall be less at ease.

"If you like, this shall be your room. It suits you. The neutral paper makes it restful for thinking, and the recess is all ready for a couch. Look, it's waiting for you. I will take the other room because of the clothes-closet, and I'll enjoy leaning out across the white window-sill for the fresh air.

"We shall visit each other. We shall be free

and easy. You will come and go and receive your friends, do as you please, without ever having to account to me.

"But we are going to suffer, perhaps, in order to remain content and preserve the multitude of joys that one experiences when alone?

"This dividing wall is nothing more, after all, than a thin membrane through which the presence in the next room will ooze. When you are surrounded by your friends in the lively hum and buzz of comradely conversation, they will suddenly notice the shadow of an intruder moving as a woman moves. In the bottom of their hearts they will have us much married, you and me—the marriage of a friend is a little like a theft—and without your suspecting it, at that very moment, in the very midst of their talk, they will leave you.

"Do you really believe we shall be happy? I, for my part, would not like your friends to desert you. It seems unfair that you should be loved the less because of love. Are you quite sure that one has the right to impose one's unalloyed hope upon a person for a lifetime? Are you sure that in the name of love the person one has chosen can remain the best of all persons? . . . Tell me, are you sure you will not bear me a grudge?

"And can the most beautiful union *remain* beautiful? For we are about to sign a pact. There's no denying it. What's to be done about this transport that we are, this constant expectation, this clinging intoxication?

"You know we shall have only each other inti-

mately. Even inanimate things will exert a tendency to influence us. When the little lodging will take on our mould and there will be chairs to hold out our habits to us and a brown pulsating clock, creature of even utterance and over-sensitive soul, the fond familiar place will weigh and impose itself upon us.

"So the host of wishes, the magnificent secrets, the kernel of sadness, the nomadic hopes must all be made to enter by this door into our associated days? Tell me, how is one to act? Must happiness, *true* happiness without law or bridle, also be shut up here, here and nowhere else? And must happiness be the same for the two of us who are different?

"There's a children's fairy tale that once there was a princess whose heavily embroidered robe was by a magic command made to pass through a ring.

"Lovers betrothed think they understand love. But they have not lived together—and *every day.* They don't know what that means. Those who love as in books do not contemplate a long journey when they set out together, and if the short-lived blaze vanishes at the first turning in the road, it is not a great misfortune. Another spark will do for another kindling. And there are those who *renounce,* abdicate their own selves, bend the knee, and trust to love. . . . But how are those to act who are not cut in heroic marble, who do not want to lie or renounce, who don't pity the *other* one, who are not afraid of themselves, who love

as people love in actual life, who are like us? Perhaps you know better than I do. You are a man and older than I am, but I—I ask myself . . .

"I was ready, as women are, for great impossible things. I never thought about them very clearly, but I felt my emotions pierce me like dagger thrusts. They inspired me with an all-powerful spirit, and if I had had to batter down mountains, or dash through a river of fire, or die in your stead, I should have closed my eyes and done it at one go.

"And behold the test. The test is here. Why is it that the thing one awaits and expects never is the actual test? The acual test has only a sorry way about it, a commonplace aspect, a very reduced compass; it holds nothing but monotonous moments jogging along one after the other; it stops just at the foreshortened shadow at your feet, and my arms which I was about to open are, you see, arms of lead.

"Before I entered these rooms love looked like you and the future shone like a festival just beginning. What is left of all that? I no longer hear the chimes of golden promises ringing in my ears. I no longer feel the hosannas of my heart, and it's as though I scarcely saw you in the gloomy corner where you are standing."

I see the little dwelling where the hesitant evening has not yet taken its place. The silence is laid bare, life is showing us her skeleton; through the mottled panes one sees that the hour has red eyes and the walls confronting us in their inflex-

ible truthfulness have become our four upright witnesses.

I feel like running away.

## XI

When everybody was assigned a seat in the carriages, whips cracked and the procession got under way.

The carriage at the head in a splash of sunshine drew the whole line after it, shattering the massive silence of the street. The occupants were still settling themselves, the ladies with a great rustling of silk and a vast deal of twisting and turning before they got themselves comfortably installed, while the men were obliged to sit forward on the edge of the seats and be very careful of the disposition of their legs.

"Lovely weather," said one of the two ladies, "they're lucky." No one answered. They held themselves in abeyance for the usual conviviality to come later, and passed the time looking through the lowered windows at the unknown quarter through which the procession was winding, where the houses sank upon each other and the people in workaday clothes stood still to stare with eyes of envy.

The second carriage had set off at a rapid pace; the coachman was holding in his frisky pair.

"Say what you like, she's a beautiful bride."

Like most very old ladies, this one suggested widowhood. Even in talking she exhaled the attenuated sadness that invests old people with a protective halo.

"Oh, she's just like the rest. What's in her favor is that she's fair. A brunette bride always makes you think of a fly in milk. At least, that's my opinion . . ."

That was a good start. One remark led to another; the conversation livened up. The ladies in their silk gowns felt conscious of sharing in pomp and an important ceremony.

"I was told she ran away from home last year, with . . ."

The carriage jolted and zigzagged, but the group sat undisturbed. Each felt drawn to the other three by a decidedly increasing sympathy.

What spirit haunted these carriages? All these people were held by an obsession. They had seen the bride in her starry whiteness and persistently retained an image with a halo round it. The bride was the sole topic.

"I don't approve of a double standard," said another lady. "They did a tremendous amount for her sister's wedding; you know they did, while they're not doing a thing for this poor child." A shrug of the shoulders. "I don't think it's fair."

Everything she said came out with a ripple in it from the unevenness of the paving. Her neighbor was plunged in dreams, unaware. A day triumphal arose out of the distant past when she

too walked in white. "Twenty-seven years like one month! How time does fly!"

They warmed up to their subject.

"She is making a very bad match: he hasn't a cent . . ."

"You forget she's well over twenty-two. A girl has got to take a husband when she finds one. Husbands don't grow in the front-yard."

The perspiration came out in beads on their fleshy foreheads. A stop. What had happened? A block? An accident? Plumed hats were stuck out of carriage doors. "Get in again, madam, you can't see anything. You'll break your aigrette. If I tell you . . ."

The procession shortened like a snake drawing in its coils.

"Ha, ha! I know someone who will not find it dull to-night!"

Their laughter took on a sharper edge; smiles lurked in the corners of their mouths just deep enough to show that they understood, that they had their own recollections and at the same time were in well-bred company . . . This lady with the air of knowing a thing or two . . . What? . . . Without waiting to be importuned, she drew herself up heroically and whispered something over the frilled hat of the little girl beside her. They threw themselves back beaming, stuffed full. "Impossible!"

Boots creaked, gowns rustled. The carriages began to clatter through the streets again.

The laughter of young people. Not very

loud. Hiding something sweet and indefinably solemn. She was only fourteen. She had nothing but her thin little feelings, which, however, kept her straight and haughty as an Infanta. By leaning over slightly she succeeded in seeing the bride. The bride . . . the white word flitted about her like a light ball. . . . But straightway she saw the bride her eyes fell. The same emotion had surprised her on Sunday at mass when she saw the host rise in a beam of light, and also when she listened to the hand-organ grind out arias. Ecstasy leapt within her and hope sang: "Me too some day . . ."

The last carriage kept behind; a low coupé with drawn shades. A stiffly wired bouquet shed its fragrance within. As it sped rapidly by, heads turned around for a long look and for the sake of the virginal memory it left behind.

I was in that last speeding carriage. I had obeyed my mother's entreaties, I had agreed to figure in this masquerade.

So as not to rumple my fairy dress I forced myself not to make a movement but to remain impassive and avoid the least little stir. It was my rôle to receive the host of looks converging upon me as if levelled at a target, hard and fast, crowding, curious. I confess that beneath my snowy veil and sanctified air I lent myself to the situation with a bit of vanity.

It takes me a long time to undress. My bridal costume is fastened by a thousand hidden snaps and pins. I have trouble in getting out of it.

My room frightens me. "Take possession of us," say the chairs and tables. "Act, command, try your hand, you are in your own home, it is your life which is arising, we are watching you. What are you going to do?"

The more the furniture goads, the heavier the languor that settles upon me, the less I know, the less I advance. In vain I summon to my aid ideas from without; none takes hold. I repeat, for example, that this is the test of both of us, the beginning of our union. I fancy myself clutching at resolutions, but they fall back at my approach and sink routed into the folds of the curtains. Is it really necessary to struggle? Wouldn't it be better to put my head in my hands and drop into the softness and restfulness of my new arm-chair?

When we came here a little while ago, it was *he* who was the first to experience this sort of trouble. We had been looking over our home and when the tour was ended he took me in his arms, and I felt the warm flesh of his kiss under my chin. A blow seemed to strike my bowels. I tightened up into a ball, my muscles tense, thrown on the defensive. An evil fear made me shiver. He raised his head. I had never seen him look so tragic. His features were hardened, his eyes swimming . . . I fell away from him like a flower snapped from its stem.

A sudden instinct sent me to the looking-glass, as if it held an answer to everything. Maybe looking-glasses do offer the eternal answer to the riddle of the universe.

I had said to myself: "You will be close to him, you two will be alone together, perhaps it will be beyond human power to try to be happy." I used to fancy life as a struggle, a piece of work to be done, a masterpiece, and imagined what my acts would be—all voluntary and making for perfection. I forgot that they would have to be performed by these arms with their warm flesh.

I had thought: "He knows me through and through, I have made him read everything." But no, he knows nothing. He does not know the lovely shape of my breasts, the lyre of my hips, the curves of my legs, nor this unknown body the expression of which is so changing that it is like some murmured tale which the light embraces and tells aloud.

It remains for me to bestow a final confidence upon him; that of the body unveiling itself, *daring* to confess itself. Is this not the purest confidence? But let it not come before its own hour, for it must lead to a moment of truth so naked and so unexpected that it frightens me a little.

It is strange: this evening I live with the whole of my body for the first time. I exist wherever it is. Even as I stand here fixed and tense in front of the glass, I follow a line which may arch, swell and melt away and which already bears the shape of love.

I can imagine everything . . . for there's no need of having loved in order to be a lover. All I should have to do, if I dared, would be to twine my arms around his neck, press him hard, and harder still, and the moment would come when I should forget the modesty of my single life.

And without knowing any more one would be lost, distraught, acquiescent, lulled to sleep even to the soul, more beautiful than one is beautiful.

I can go still further, for the flesh that clasps cannot be deceived. When the man and the woman are united, it is the woman subdued, armed with her weakness, who becomes the stronger. I am sure of it already. In the depths of my ignorant flesh, I already feel domination germinating. It is not I; it is a law older than I that is seeking to fulfill itself.

And suddenly I am frightened. . . .

But I am mad . . . Man, woman, nothing but two words, which are not of the stuff of life. Is there a single emotion in which I recognize myself? Truth? But it is the truth of others. The truth that reaches you is always different. Isn't it senseless to dread what depends upon yourself? Are we strangers that I should hesitate like this to run to him? Isn't he on the other side of the door, he of whom my body is *thinking?* Isn't it enough for us to look upon each other? Is there a single question he cannot understand? One seeks happiness. It is all so simple . . .

Ah, let us go astray every day, let us deceive ourselves, let us suffer alongside our own hearts,

let us try to clasp the invisible! But this evening there is nothing but a thin partition between my secret and myself. I feel my heart throbbing as if it were laid bare. I am beautiful, I am alive. . . .

Am I not right? . . .

# BOOK II

*BEING*

# I

IT is her eyes in particular. Ever since her eyes have made a part of my life, I have known what nostalgia for Brittany means, and the infinite mournfulness with which it permeates a human being.

She is like the rest of her race, short-legged, round, thick-set, and her gestures conceal rather than reveal her hands. She talks in a sing-song and ends with a sigh. Her name is Marie, as though she were a little nurse-maid of eighteen at thirty francs a month. Oh, it's not the room she takes up. But for her blue-thistle gaze and the plaint of her body, you'd scarcely know she was there.

Seven o'clock. I am already on the street with bent head, insensible to the allurements of the shops, driven blindly on with cheeks inflamed by the wind.

The great porte-cochère, the steps three at a time, two pulls at the bell, long, breathless minutes; finally the door opens, cautiously. Marie behind the door squeezes herself up on tip-toe against the wall to let me pass.

It is almost a sacrilege to speak in a raised voice as I do and bring in so much of the outside air. "Is dinner ready, Marie, is everything ready?"

Since Marie never answers, I go straight into the kitchen. Goodness, nothing done. Well, I'll have to get at the supper myself. There's still a good half-hour left, I believe.

As I hastily remove my wraps, I feel the dull pang that assails you at the sight of disorder.

There, I have the water boiling now and the cooking is well under way. I didn't know I was so quick and capable. After all, Marie's only a child.

Marie bustles about. I see her two reddish, porous, spatulate hands pounce on things, I hear the clash of utensils. Her person becomes many persons, she jostles me, moves hither and thither like a distracted tortoise, bends almost double to pick up a strainer. . . . To be sure the kitchen *is* tiny.

I speak to her as one speaks to a child. "Do you understand me, Marie? Don't be afraid, I am not unkind." The lifeless fixity of her face suddenly comes undone, her features contract. Marie was dulled by the monotonous gloom of an asylum in a distant quarter of the city. She slightly raises the heavenly blue of her eyes without fastening them on anything. I see her tenacious hatred wake up and stir. A single flash. Then her red-rimmed eyes flutter and fall; she is in order again, in the vague sort of order characteristic of things inaccessible and forlorn.

I realize she cannot understand me. To her I mean constraint, uprooting, exile, that unusualness which throws simple people out of their or-

bits. And though she has never been accustomed to anything else than maltreatment, neglect, and beatings, I understand . . . I try to be gentler, to smile when I turn toward her, for in the end visible kindness should make itself seen . . . And it would be so good to reclaim this nature, to explain everything to her, beginning at the beginning.

I recall the scene of yesterday evening. We were at table. She brought in the smoking soup-tureen at arm's length. Her heavy tread rolled like a cannon-ball upon our delight in being together, then she retreated to the kitchen like a dog slinking to its kennel. A crash of china. I jumped up.

"Something broken?"

"No, madam."

"But, Marie. . ."

"No, madam, no, madam . . ."

I was close beside her and this time looked deep into her eyes. I saw the freckles on her white skin, and there emanated from her the amazing innocence of an accused child. Her voice came from her palpitating throat with a quiver in it.

"No, no, no."

Poor Marie. I felt remorseful. "I beg your pardon, Marie, we were mistaken."

Nevertheless I didn't budge, as if I were at length going to learn why one human being can be so terrorized by another . . . She too stood motionless. I did not notice that her attitude was rather peculiar. I put my hand on her shoulders.

"My little Marie . . ." At this she staggered and trod heavily on breaking china. Her face was imploring . . .

Hidden under her bell-shaped Breton petticoat which touched the floor lay my pretty gray china cup shivered to bits.

She behaved the way girls brought up by Sisters always do. She crouched against the wall, her forehead hidden in the crook of her arm. Her bosom as pinched as a wasp's went up and down precipitately, and the tears began to flow.

I stopped gathering up the pieces to console her gently.

"It's not your fault, Marie . . . come, don't cry, don't cry."

Marie close by is bending over the sink rubbing it with a brush round and round always on the same spot. The water slaps on the tile floor and squirts over my dress. Her movements have something eternal about them and the appearance of never-ending complaint.

There is nothing to say. Whatever I do, she remains dumb, and the more I try to reach her, the more she avoids me.

But what does Marie matter? I force myself to get back to my own affairs. And quickly. *He* will come in, there will be his gaiety, the joy flashing in our voices, the day's doings to tell of, and our dear union only a fortnight old . . .

Marie is there; nothing can efface her. My irri-

tation against her boils up, then turns against myself. It is not pity I feel but rather an intolerable impotence. I hurl myself with all my force against the eclipsed expression of the Breton girl, and each time it hurts.

Marie . . .

And I used to think that to love was to feel yourselves alone. On the contrary, it is to feel yourself to be many.

No, no, love is not the emotion of two people. No, as soon as one feels love one wants to love *everyone,* win over everyone, shine on everyone, even on this ignorant head. What sin have I committed that a single welcome should be denied me? She does not smile; that's my fault. What is lacking in my love that I should face the vexation of a culpable failure? My pity for Marie and my love for him are one, because I have only one heart. And since my heart is repulsed, is it impure?

Marie has resumed her feeble, beaten-down existence. She has set aside the brush, her blue eyes look beyond the walls, she wipes her wet hands on her apron—her hostile hands, which are peculiarly hers.

What can one do? But there must be *something* she believes in, there must be something one can do to move her, there must be some word to say to uncover the tomb of her heart.

I stopped. For a moment I left my work. . . .

Where find the ultimate words of love, the final words—simple and difficult—when one does not

even know the word to make one poor inferior Marie blossom out?

## II

When I am old I shall warm myself at the rich shining vision of the first days of my love. I shall hold out the dry sticks of my arms. I shall beg for a little fire, a little sap. I shall return to the present with feebly beating heart and faltering step.

Poor withered old woman, you do not remember; and others will bestow upon you the charity of showing you a picture of lovers. You see us as we, wife and husband, used to embrace, how I leapt to his side, how his mouth clung to the fruits of my cheeks, and how we laughed a matchless laughter. Well, that is enough for you, return to your winter, to the virgin plain of your old age, to your years perched precipitously over death.

Am I the first by any chance to hide the truth from you?

The truth of to-day has no brilliance or halo. My joy in being a young bride is not at all what I used to fancy it would be.

The dominant motive of my life at present, its great preoccupation, is by no means to invent new words of love. It is to give battle to the existence that one buys—buys with pennies and infinite pains.

We are poor. As we each earn our own living, we have decided that I shall manage the budget for both. It is my job to concoct the meals; and they must be wholesome, pleasing to the eye, intelligently planned, tasty. The house must be bright, beautiful, convenient, cozy, stamped with an air of prosperity. Time has to be economized, a ceaseless tyranny must be exercised over things, nothing may be neglected, order must be adhered to slavishly, hygienic principles followed vigilantly. And lastly, all these things, which are everything, must be accomplished successfully, and so successfully that once caught and conquered they will come easily.

If only I had the money with which to fare forth to battle, it might be easy, but the sum at my disposal is about enough for a doll's budget. You could hold it on the tip of a knife; it is inexorably minute.

Besides, girl that I am, I do not possess overly much of that courageous ingenuity and imagination which go so far, nor of the determination which clenches its fists and stares a sombre defiance.

Love? Why does one never foresee that there will be accounts and money cares, so important and so tormenting, and at the very start? Why doesn't one know that these things take precedence over love, over everything in daily life?

You have to get up to do the marketing an hour earlier than you're used to. You have to learn to sew because a new dress and the joy of

pleasing him are a wish of love, but also represent a sum of money.

At the time I did not know it, but it was an immense triumph that he was comfortable and happy when he returned home. There was the delight his surprise gave me when, with great pride, I produced some jolly-looking fruit for dessert. And see—there was the modest glory of having been able to buy the lovely flowers for his room with my own coppers.

As a girl I walked towards love anticipating fiery words, forceful looks, and two solemn presences . . . I used to say to myself: Love! . . .

And behold, by way of humble events and simple tasks I have found the affirmation of love.

## III

We were sleeping side by side, our breathing intermingled; and nothing was sweeter than this nearness of our slumber.

He put out the lamp and stretched himself beside me, and we remained like that, silent, drowned in sweetness and the night. It was a living impression of repose.

Beside his close warmth a torpidity brooded, for the days were exhausting, and while he raised himself slowly on his elbow to lull me to sleep with his eyes, I broke away in spite of myself from the beneficent clasp and fell asleep like a child.

But last night, although nearly midnight, sleep was slow in coming. He kissed my lips. Suddenly a strange will broke in me . . . What instinct was I obeying? . . . Then a violent repulsion. I knitted my brows. Ah, I destested him . . .

That night it was I who wide-eyed and curious watched him fall asleep.

## IV

There was one second above all . . . .
If I had had the time to think, I should have thought that this second was worth the whole of life, the whole of death, and even more than life.

## V

The nights are links in a chain. Previously life consisted of day and night; white, black; black, white. Since then life goes on unbrokenly.

## VI

This morning when I caught a reflection of myself in the shop windows, I noticed I had a strange air of authority. a self-assurance quite new and indefinable, a manner crisper, more clear-cut. When I purchased my provisions I had the

courage to haggle, and the market-women treated me as an equal.

My firmness and decisiveness have made Marie reveal the pale ocean of her eyes. A distance seems to have been set between us.

## VII

They point to us, just stopping short of using their index fingers, as an example of a happy couple. They speak enviously of our great good fortune as if we were bound on an adventurous voyage on which you embark only once in your life.

What do their "young couple," their "happy pair" mean? Do people really imagine that you arrive at happiness so quickly and easily, and that to be sent off *together* into the steep mountain country, life, is in itself enough to make you find the fulness of life?

Happy! . . . When everything tends to estrange you, the opposite natures of man and woman, their conflicting interests, their very physical attraction for each other. Happy! When you realize that two beings, however close they may be, are forever divided. When, no matter how free you are, marriage forces you to restrain and prostrate yourself. When, apart from your joint life, you have your own career to pursue. And when, after the day's work is accomplished, come the night's kisses as if to undo the good

of the day's work—behold the body, the blood, the lips of love—and you change from friends into lovers again.

To be sure, there are occasionally moments of blinding delight, and it is sweet to lean on a shoulder and have a second in the duel of life and be with a man who smiles and takes you in his arms.

But to be happy! To feel that your measure is filled, that you are yourself and him. . . . Man and woman are above all enemies; you feel it at every turn. And yet you tell yourself that at the heart of some inaccessible firmament there does exist a sublime harmony and it *must* be attained, even if the road to it is superhuman and your strength fails. And this harmony and this road must be taken afresh every day, if ever one approaches them, for a human being changes from day to day.

I am already somewhat stronger and simpler, and somewhat appeased, but still we are not "happy" as yet.

## VIII

It is true; she was sincere . . .

While talking she cast off her enormous furs and fiddled with her rings in the unconscious wish to remove them. Her restless head was set high on a neck encircled by pearls. Minus the litter of ornaments she would have tempted you to hold your hand out to her.

The landscape, swallowed up in long gulps by the window of the railway-coach, had a sombre fascination for her, because it was moving almost as fast as her pain. You saw her shoulders gradually shrink together and slowly draw down the beautiful column of flesh supporting her head. Then you saw them raised helplessly to ask the eternal question, "What shall I do?" And then you saw them in the characteristic gesture of all sufferers—thrown back as if to toss off the pack of unhappiness loaded on her back.

Her story burst and rose in precipitate bubbles. Her voice, at moments, broke. The woman at her side remained perfectly calm, walled up in the dull indifference accompanying the forties. At the jolting of the train she merely shook her head —was she listening?—and turned toward the flying window where her own story was passing.

Darkness would soon be falling. So I had an excuse for going to sleep, and as soon as I shut my eyes the young woman took up her tale of woe anew, twice, three times, ten times. The whole of her misery escaped from under a mask of restraint.

"And listen, the other day . . ."

Did I need to hear what she was going to say?

At the end of one sentence I caught "my little girls." I could see her little daughters—exactly alike, well-behaved, in airy frocks, two heads with long, elastic curls, a twin step in walking—the sort of children who are their parents all over again and invariably provoke the question,

"Whom does she look like—her father or her mother?" as if you have to search into a child's origin.

I could see her husband too. Haven't all these women the same way of saying "my husband"? I could see him short, bustling, jovial—really not a bad sort—and with a chubby face, the only kind I could possibly match up with the young woman's insipid face. Though she said nothing of a garden, I imagined a very strait-laced one with rectilinear, timidly-flowering walks, the sort of garden that is not cherished with love. And I also saw the family in their home, a substantial white-stone ornate building. I raised my eyes furtively. I must have got a poor view of her when she came in an hour ago. Now she looked pretty. Her features were regular, her color had heightened, her quivering mouth showed her lips to the fullest, and her distressed hand, pushing back her hair, disclosed a brow eloquent, smooth and flawless as ivory. Certain women derive their entire beauty from the pathetic. She was one of them.

Her eyes turned from the scenery; I lowered my lids.

"He doesn't understand me any more . . . it's all over . . . I am nothing to him . . . still . . . a love match . . ."

The scraps of her plaint were borne off by the wind, the engine snorted more vigorously, and the last remnants went down with me in the roar of a far-off, formidable lullaby.

I soon awoke. Still bemoaning her lot, with the same phrase, it seemed to me, always at the same point. She went on with such bitter persistence that in the end you couldn't help learning her story by heart. I did at any rate. The two women kept looking at each other—shadowy vis-à-vis—the younger one far from the other, far from us, far from everything, rooted in her life, in her square garden, in her thirty years. It was as if she were talking aloud for the first time.

I listened. Each detail revealed a year, a corner of the house, an important event. I felt a dull rage fermenting in me instead of the timidity and compunction one usually experiences in trespassing upon another's inmost recesses.

Why? Perhaps because I, a stranger, had not the power to interpose and hold the secret of this trouble so as to remedy it.

Ah, I no longer need to listen nor need to know the man in order to feel that he is right to lose himself in his business and be merely a good father who sees in his wife nothing but the mother of his children and shrugs his shoulders when she heaves with sighs.

The evening air was blowing in cooler through the upper half of the window. We were entering a plain where the green of the meadows was deepening into mauve. Two rows of trees, which had been a profile against the sky when seen from afar, turned into a black curtain suddenly drawn. Here and there houses stood out as though groping in the dark—faces blotted out as soon as

arisen—one field swallowed up the next; the ragged line of a hedge came and went; an embankment followed, its slope daubed with brown, unwholesome stains, its top dressed with tufted grass and straggling bushes, which moved their arms like signals.

The young woman's brows were drawn. She was questioning the obscure flickering stretch of space. I read the questions in her face: Why does he merely graze her forehead when he comes back in the evening? Why does he keep her out of everything? Why does he never feast on her presence or heed her advice? How did he love her? She had been right a short while before when she had said bitterly: "A little less than a prostitute, a little more than a servant."

The woman was certainly suffering and calling upon a God who could not answer. At night when the close jealous house is asleep, she undoubtedly falls to her knees in secret and wrings her barren hands and invokes misery, love, grief, as if the sacred words were for the whole world. Thou, God whom she implores, Thou knowest well the reason of her trouble, a simple reason, brutal, elementary. Why dost Thou let her hunt for others?

I threw myself back because I both wanted and feared that my face might betray me.

The Midi was beginning, the first olive trees were rounding off the landscape, the night sky was already smiling in the rosy light of dawn.

In our times no woman has the right to live

under the shelter of a man's labor. The woman who dares to accept such shelter should abdicate and commit her dignity to the hands that are productive. She should consent to her dethronement and take the condescending love that is fed to the weaker without complaining.

Men begin—the women know it well—by adoring this weakness. "My wife," that piece of fragility, those useless days, those little arms which don't know how to do anything, the jewels he brings home, the great astonished eyes, the mincing steps, everything that is touching and contrasts with the struggle of his existence. Then he comes to extract pride from this relation. "It is I who protect, sustain, feed her. It is I . . ." He mounts a few steps higher and sees her a little lower, incapable, infantile, unequal to battle, unequal to his power. Each day inevitably finds them a little farther apart, and she in approaching him is bound to raise her eyes while he condescends. If his love lasts it takes the very form of contempt, though neither is conscious of it. Which is just and proper.

A woman supported by her husband has no right to protest. If she is not *earning* her living, she should have some work to do, should use her arms, her idle strength, her health. Merely bringing children into the world is not enough.

The fat lady starts up from her entrenchment of cushions. "We are almost there. We must get ready."

Bags pulled open emit the animal odor of

leather and give out nickel glints as they are snapped shut again. Then the fire of the rings disappears under the gloves. "We are there!" They are now quite free to stare at me.

What a metamorphosis. She has resumed her former appearance of a lady. She is scarcely pretty. In the glimmer of the night-lamp she seems sharp-featured and masked by a ghastly pallor, as if the generous sun had abjured her forever.

Each turn of the wheels brings us closer to the town. The young woman drawing herself up reassumes her manner of a somebody. She is back in her setting, already less unhappy because she is nearer her unhappiness. She pulls out her watch. Five minutes still. Time enough to lean on one's elbow and think sad thoughts pro tem, which come running like a docile flock.

I put my hand up to my forehead to prevent her searching my eyes for the fountain of compassion denied her. There is no compassion for her in me, neither is there in the opal-tinted meadows, nor under the sapphire of the sky. To find compassion she would have to reconstruct her life from top to bottom. A fate such as hers lies outside the fate of humanity; suffering such as hers is beside and apart from the suffering of humanity. I say her fate has not made her suffer enough yet and the woman does not deserve to live.

A woman who does nothing is fallen in the sight of love.

He and I are going to the country on our holiday. I have been thirsty for its freshness. . . .

The carriage is empty now. You feel the double pulse of the train as it rolls between two slopes spitting out rings of smoke, pursued, you'd think, by its own speed, travelling on, on, on . . .

## IX

We've been here a week.

Strange days, without axis or prop or stay, passed as if outside of something, as if you had been asked to step up to a door but not invited inside. Nature is not easy to reach and penetrate.

We had longed to live in this spot conceiving it beforehand as an oasis set in dew. And here it is under our feet with its earth which smells good and its breezes which tinge our cheeks. For all our ardor and assiduity nature preserves her mystery; she is an unresponsive mother insensible to the clamor of her children. When we draw near, she stops talking and either drops a veil or retires completely into seclusion. "You would like to assay my movements, cull the delicate scent of the grass blade by blade, meditate like this tree, follow the steps of the peasants who are my only kith and kin, be a wave in space, unravel the relations of things, and delude yourselves with my warmth. That is what everybody wants. May your wish recoil on you. Do not try to reach me.

Do not turn your heads in my direction. Let the thrills and tremors of your feelings pass between yourselves. I know you not."

In order to arrive at a mutual understanding with nature, one undoubtedly must have more of the heart of a recluse, a body more inclined earthward, a face of greater taciturnity. We are intruders.

It is only in the evening that you blend and fall into harmony with everything. Night awaits you —you see—below the horizon, and we set out to meet it.

We take each other's arms, I feel my joy preparing; he smiles at the care I take to prevent his catching cold, and off we go, arm in arm, tramping to the tune of a sounding tread like two comrades who once were schoolmates.

The little nestling village lies far behind; at a gulp the turn in the road swallows up the last hut. The landscape ahead is still variegated, but as it draws gently nearer the colors wane, the ground flattens, the features relax as in a face after a smile.

Silence . . . Twilight within us is falling also. To admit it we watch the surrounding dusk with swelling chests and quivering nostrils.

On the rising ground opposite a yellow point is kindled, another and another, performing an unconscious duty—to usher in the night. And night is now here. Close by, in the fields, she has already drowned the olive-trees, which have no compact mass to offer in resistance, scarcely even any

outlines, defenseless, except for their hundred-year-old trunks. Their life is a thing of quivering, silvery breezes, and when the darkness comes slinking and whispering, a breath will lull their gray-lined brows to sleep.

Along the embankment on either side of the road, trees—you can't tell what sort of trees any more—make great human gestures, as if to give warning of a drama about to begin. Instinctively we quicken our pace and draw closer together. The rich blood runs lively in our veins. We share a fleeting warmth.

And now noises spring up, noises that belong to night alone and are a part of its peacefulness; mournful bayings, which echo throws back faithfully from yon slope; the croaking of the frogs, which blight the heart of the atmosphere; a human call now and then, direct and piercing, and from the ground the metallic chirping of the crickets.

How at ease you feel, full of loving-kindness, and how sincere you are. You have sins lurking in your flesh, crimes piled up in your brain, a sombre mood inhabiting your heart. Everything can be confessed and laid bare. The night is all-comprehending. Night-time is different from the stiffly starched daytime with its color and form to distract man from his intimate verity. You can venture upon the wildest thoughts, expand to your uttermost limits, forget your own existence, and discard all past gestures. They were all inadequate. You don't want to retain any of them except the gesture you would make here—spread

your arms while walking and hold your hands open like two pure, empty chalices.

Complete blackness now. You can no longer distinguish between silence and space, fear and the rustling; all things are merged in each other, trees with trees, their masses with the slope, and the slope, deprived of its contours, with the sky, which has come down to join the earth. Everything is blended, obliterated. The very cypresses, during the daytime a spear thrust at the azure, are also added to the darkness.

Beneath our eyes, tired from not seeing anything, the road kindly extends its vaporous pallor. Except for the road no line to arrest the impulse within, no perspective. The only clear things, our own figures.

We have never before entered such solitude together, nor ever before been laid so bare to each other. It makes us walk slowly and solemnly, as if we were passing beneath the eye of God.

The idea of us as a couple. We. We two.

Must an idea, then, remain implanted in the hearts of human beings in order to keep them upright? If I did not feel the pulsing of my love constraining me to live, the night, with no reason to respect my spirit, would stretch me out, I fancy, on any chance slope beneath the large serenity.

But I am upheld. Every intake of fresh air gives a new thrill and a youthful vigor to the idea in my heart, and I feel it mounting so swiftly that I must run to keep up with it. So as to hold it

fast for my protection I rake together my loveliest recollections. Are my loveliest recollections those of our nights in each other's arms, our kisses, the storm that beat against our bodies? . . . No, they are not. As I raise my eyes to where the firmament should be—if it still exists—I find the blessed peacefulness which comes from his presence. The sentiment that grips my heart when I feel myself taking part in his life is lofty. It has something in it of respect, and trust, and pity; it is hard to say just what. It spurs me to action, even to boldness, and it raises around me a strong wall in which I am secure.

This is not a recollection; it is a bit of the future, and the future alone is what you discover as you go forward into the infinite. At one bound you mount to the summits of love. Love is the future magnetized by the heart.

He is there. His profile is massive in outline. He towers over the sunken country, the clods crunch beneath his feet. I walk close beside him. I ask for nothing. Maybe my only wish is that my footsteps should make less noise and my shoulders take up less room.

But I have another wish. I know what it is. Although I love him with my whole heart, I want to love him more. One does not attain to love once for all; the heart can never be filled to the full. How far shall we go? I can go on and on without stopping and outdistance the sources of the night; my youth is inexhaustible, my feet will never weary. I want to love him *more*.

Space heaves a deeper breath. She is traversed by currents, scoops of darkness, aromatic whiffs. The perfume sweetens the lips; flowers must be dotting this hedge. And suddenly space goes mad. A black wind swirls down from the tree-tops and fills the nocturnal expanse with the creaking of branches.

Must we stop at the greatest moment, at the point where the road looks supernatural, as though it possessed a density of its own and were suspended in space? . . . I should have liked to walk further; one never goes far enough. Must we really return to the stolid lamp and babbling kisses?

Not immediately. Let us prolong this great sombre moment. Let us stay here where even time might come to a standstill. The trees droop lower here, and in these tranquil meadows the spirit may play hide-and-seek.

It is really unhappiness that makes you stop. I return from the night; all I bring back is this strangled throat, a body like a tortoise-shell covering a silent heart and blinded eyes.

If I emerge from myself, disconsolateness everywhere, spread all over the world. The sleeping desert. . . .

He is close beside me, but since he lives, he can do nothing for me. I can do nothing for him. I used to think that in loving him I crowned him.

Love is not enough. This evening I saw his life rise from the ground, distinct from love, *outside* of mine; I saw his life, bared to all the winds, isolated from everything, raise and satisfy itself. I see that this is right.

His life is complete in itself, unique and important; his life is not merely the image that inspires me, the voice that I evoke, the face I love dearly. His life is an insuperable force, vivid, inviolable and free, which my heart out of sheer love of him failed to recognize. I was right a few minutes ago to want to blot myself out, because I ought not to count. Beyond my limited, restricted presence, he has the whole of infinity to breathe in.

Then where are the nights which are to enlighten me? Of him I know nothing but my love, nothing except that by his very existence he contradicts what I know of him. Who will tell me how far I must go and to what I must attain? I have slept in his arms, I have lived side by side with all his cares, and I have given myself up to him with a joy like unto which there is nothing. All I have given is myself. And yet more is necessary.

And a great conviction rises up straight and strong and shines as if a light had sprung from the midst of the meadows.

I am only a woman, I can think only spasmodically. I love as one weeps, but there comes a day of which this is the night, on which your forehead touches the profound truth. You

feel the loving-kindness of your heart aroused, and you oddly understand that the perfect union of man and woman has never been part of the natural scheme of things, and in order to be happy together it is not enough to love one another.

Come. We may return. Press me close to you, if you will, closer still. Don't let us talk.

I know why I am content: your arms, my all-powerful life, our firm footsteps. I do not know why the slight shadow seems to have vanished: to live, go forward, pierce the narrow track of the road with your clear eyes for stars, follow a night one does not see . . .

And then, O God, in braving the heavens, to understand with love that which transcends love.

## X

I hesitate to go out on the street. I feel that people's eyes are drawn to my figure. There's no use fooling myself. The little girls actually point to me with furtive, vinegary glances, for they are more ingenuously hypocritical than women. Their insistent gaze embarrasses me.

Two long months to wait before the first cry of my child! If only I carried nothing beside my child. I feel also an imprisoned love developing which beats at the bars of its cage and chafes so that I don't know how to distract it.

The layette is quite ready; swaddling-bands warm to the touch, chemises like a doll's, caps which will never be of use; the equipment of a marionette; linen as soft as lint, bibs round and puffy as cockades. I have spread everything out in front of me, and each article as it passes through my hands assumes a shadowy lifelikeness.

Two months before I shall really know whether I am to be like other mothers, a brooding hen, with folded wings and in-turned heart, passionate for my own children, cattish and carping in my attitude toward other children. Two months before I shall know the secret force of that wild love which, they say, springs up all at once.

I am being initiated however. The other women give me a hearty welcome; they make the impression of crowding together to make room for me. A real sisterhood? Or the imperceptible joy of seeing a rival temporarily diminished? Under their escort I enter into the forbidden arcana. "What do you feel? *I*——" They make me a target for their reminiscences.

Each shamelessly outdoes the other. From the quantity and finished preciseness of the details narrated I infer that the story has been oft told. The least loquacious are the mothers who "have had a lot of them." These have nothing left but a vast, frequently refreshed memory in which their life merges in a blur with the life they have so many times carried beneath their hearts.

Which of them am I to believe? Many have broached the subject to me, many have discussed

it, none has told me the secret of being a mother, the word that would reveal, the sign, flashing and disappearing, by which the treasure awaiting me would shine from afar, which would *make me understand.* I have heard them bemoan the misery of the months before childbirth and the sufferings of childbirth itself. I have heard them boast, with the reverence of fetich-worship, of the care they gave their little ones. But here their maternity stops. I still do not know. I have two months to wait.

I plunge my fingers into the milky mass of the little garments. "Do you," I say to my husband, "see the head of your child underneath this hood? Let us try to imagine . . ."

He smiles without answering, shaken in his flesh, so lucid and so well prepared for his approaching fatherhood that I feel myself a hundred leagues behind. He, at least, knows why he will love his child, why he already loves it.

As for me, my vision is obscured by the disconcerting pictures drawn by the other women. Perhaps also I am under the ancestral pressure exerted by the long line of my foremothers. Why should I be different? What quality would make me better?

The animal heaviness reasserts its rights. My body is an unwieldy sheath overspread with sleepiness, ramified by thick blood, its cells given over to contented, torpid well-being. My very heart is struck with stupor.

To lie at full length on my bed beneath the

weight of my breasts of rock, no longer to move or think, only to feel at momentary intervals a light stirring, a caress, which gently turns on its self and folds its wings.

## XI

I scarcely dare to get up. She knew me in my slenderness of the previous summer, when I took the torrid paths like a goat leaping dangerous mountain tracks. It was from my brisk manner of ready, go! she told me, that she could tell how warm our love was.

We were living in the same inn. The very first day I was struck by the blooming youthfulness of this woman who so skilfully escaped the burden of the forties and constantly trailed a lover, a lover with a vindictive eye and bullish neck and forehead. Perhaps on close inspection you might suspect the fine tracery of wrinkles on her transparent skin. Nevertheless she shone resplendent as we younger women don't know how to shine.

Black on white, a head surcharged with mystery and night, two jewels, no, two green pools, a mouth that revealed the shape of a kiss better than other mouths, a figure not very tall but with a race and suppleness which lent dignity. Clothes planned to reveal the curves of her body. Movements kindling I know not what lights. Woman, in short, with all a woman has in her of the venomous and the childlike,

We sat directly opposite each other at table. The charm of her vivid smile, glowing face, and darting movements turned the frugal meal for me into a riotous feast.

One morning as I was starting out on a walk by myself for nowhere in particular she came up to me in an easy spontaneous way, as if there really did exist a sisterhood among women. Part of her loveliness was a deep, maternal voice; in crystal tones she plunged into a surprising eulogy of the relationship between my husband and me. She had noticed us. How perfectly united we must be! "Married? Absurd!" She pouted. But we had such a way of locking arms, and looking and waiting for each other, also such a . . .

She went on talking and talking. I was rather bewildered . . . Was it really *us* she was describing—sombre with passion, eagerly relishing a concord that was pregnant with storms which might break suddenly from a clear sky? Wasn't it more like her own love? I was at a loss how to answer. Still I could not recognize ourselves. She clutched me and laughingly declared I was a little savage, and my being a little savage pleased her.

We came to where the country takes a sudden dip, so that to be visible to the heavens it has to cling to the bronzed trunks of the half-stripped cork-trees. We went on breasting the wind. I knitted my brows. Everything she said breathed, at least to me, another age or another sphere; it all hinged on love, was dedicated to love, and by

that very fact created a distance between us. I saw her cramped and confined by the very thing that gave her so much vitality; I saw it was her crucifixion. She was nothing but the instinct for love restricted to the need of man. Nevertheless she attracted me.

We got to know each other better. She astonished me more and more. Whether she and her lover carried on a squally conversation on the bench in the hall or whether she wandered along the narrow, brambly paths in a sort of ferocious abandon, or whether she came to me and threw her thorny crown at my feet with a radiant gesture, she was Woman as men have described her, as they have wanted her. She was the ancient bearer of a fatal property, the creature who either subdues her opponent or is subdued by him, and knows nothing else; the sorry creature of tears and fascinations . . .

She never spoke of her life or of herself. We were two women, our lot therefore was the same, she was in love, I was in love. What else need one want?

"Good-bye for the present," she cried as the cart set off down the road at a snail's pace. She stood with her head inclined tenderly sidewise and her floating veil prolonging the farewell . . . There was a bend in the road. I thought that was to be my last view of her.

But a little while ago as I was going to lie down, an imperious ring tore the silence. Actually she, her smile, her veil, her dress a tangle of silver.

"What a pretty little nest! How comfortable you must be! Well, well. Still happy?"

And then—there!—her laugh with a little savagery in it. She notices that I am expecting a baby. "Well, of all things!" She throws her gloves into the air, seats herself, gets up again, and from her hectic restlessness I infer that she feels defrauded. My home is too cozy and my manner too tranquil. Not, of course, that she wants to find me in misfortune, but it's as though I have passed over into an enemy's camp.

She has come because she is in trouble. I do my best. I hold her hands in mine and try to trace the ravages of grief on her faun face because she keeps saying: "I'm so miserable." She must be suffering. But I cannot get myself to be moved.

This is her story. Her lover has betrayed her, she is sure of it. In tidying his drawers she found letters from a woman referring to a recent rendezvous. She thought she'd die when she read them . . . Still I am unmoved. She warms up to her theme. At breakfast, then and there, a terrible scene; they fly at each other. . . . Disgust seizes me . . . To show my interest and stimulate my pity, I ask some questions. "So you had an explanation and could come to an understanding?" She snatches her hands away and draws back. "Aren't you listening?"

To come to an understanding! That would be too easy. They rushed at each other at the first pretext, each resorting to shifts and dodges and keeping silent as to the real issue, though recognizing the other's grievance. "He beat me."

She closes her beautiful victimized eyes. She has displayed the seven wounds of her heart; and the least she expects is the shelter of my breast and the succor of my arms. . . .

"But it would be so simple to tell each other the truth and try to understand each other . . ."

She keeps her flexible panther-like body from bounding up. "The truth! what truth? Do you think love is so simple? He has deceived me. That's the only truth I need to know." She gives herself up to tears, and her clear eyes turn into two bloodshot orbs.

Should I tell her that I am insensible to such despair, and her love is merely a mistake proceeding from books, it really isn't love? Should I tell her that love is logical and simple at bottom, and is less in its transports than in the gentleness it conveys? Should I tell her that men like change more than women and for a man to snatch at a passing temptation does not mean that he is trying to reach the love he prefers? Should I?

She anticipates me. "I understand, I understand, you are not in love. Poor little thing, you'll see when you love!" She sends her prophetic look around the orderly room and the, to her, inconceivable quiet. What polite excuse can she find for getting away quickly? She came a long way to meet a real sister in love. We ought to have groaned together over the common enemy who is also the common God; then she would have departed in her honorable failure aided and reinforced for the eternal contest.

Shall I let her leave like this? I have been able to secure a serenity which she does not surmise; it would be a charity to beg her to try to secure the same serenity. This woman . . . I shall say to her: "A beloved is neither a God nor an enemy, he is a friend you must discover in spite of passion. I know it's hard and needs an iron will and devotion, but I swear one succeeds . . ."

She raises the window-shade. Her face stands out—is it the same?—marred by the light.

The borders of her green eyes show the streaky after-effects of tears, her cheeks are lined, her lips have lost their blood and youthful red, the two tendons of her lovely marble neck twitch, and the cherished body in its holiday attire collapses like a broken toy.

I approach her, holding out in my comradely arms the new spirit that will blossom on the new earth. I am not the only one; other young women would speak as I do. The love by which we live is not like the love the others die of.

But when I come close to her she steps into the full light . . . I give up the idea of explaining myself. There is nothing to say. She is twenty years older than we are.

## XII

I have the feeling that I am not prepared; it is a sort of embarrassment, an obscure terror, and when I get myself to say so to the other women, they laugh and hush me up. "Don't worry. The knowledge comes of itself. Just being a mother teaches you how to raise a child."

It was by chance that I came to this street. I was walking along. The hospital. A dull flat smell surrounded the sordid building with a leprous haze. The doorway was swallowing up a long line of women from off the gray canyon of the street. I do not know what struck me—I retraced my steps and followed the women in.

We were made to wait in a room heavy with a brew of musty drug smells. Someone shut the door, and immediately there broke out a fearful hubbub, a concert of human meowings, bawls, pipings. A panic nearly seized me. With the dull patience of animals penned in together the women formed into groups and filled out blank forms, rocking and bobbing the light fragile bundles they each carried in their arms.

I went up to one of them, leaned over and looked upon the crumpled patch of a little old red face. Then I realized I had come there to occupy myself in my period of expectancy and catch a glimpse of my child in advance.

The woman's face was bloodless, like the face of a drowned corpse, and fanned by long colorless

locks limp as seaweed. Seeing the supplication in my eyes she lifted up the thick dirty-gray shawl with the air of a benefactress. "Three months." The first thing they tell of a child is its age.

The little worm very leisurely wrinkled its forehead of peeling satin and stretched itself, opened two rather glassy eyes encircled by mauve, and let out its guttural wail through a toothless aperture upholstered with flesh. The provident mother had already pulled a rubber pacifier out of her pocket, which transformed the wail into a monotonous greedy gurgle. "Will you be quiet! They're an awful trouble. You'll see," she declared, gauging my heavy figure. "I had bad luck, I had no milk. No use giving him gravy or bread soaked and boiled. He doesn't get any good out of them. If you think you can fatten them on the doctor's fine words, as if the doctors even know what they're talking about!"

"I believe you!" bawled a big blonde. The baby which she had a triumphant way of carrying had hanging cheeks and bottle-blue eyes in buttonhole slits. "Just look at mine. At nine months it ate like us. What do you say to that, eh?"

A group gathered. "What are you here for then?" asked a huge creature with a gray ogress head, high cheekbones and skin streaked with fine veins. The blonde turned her baby over and showed its chubby flesh covered with a crusty, scabby, red-streaked sheath. "Oh, only this."

The ogress dropped into an empty place on the bench and paraded her darling on her knees. "My

daughter's," she explained to the circle around her. "Her third. Maybe you think she hasn't got something to worry about—three babies and working in a factory. Babies—I know a thing or two about babies. I've had eleven." There was a general stir of compassion followed by protests. "I have two left." She danced the mite on her knee. Her tower of a body swayed back and forth, through her half-open jacket you could divine her dead breasts. There was something weird and horrible in the dismal accustomedness of her knees.

"The doctors make you fuss such a lot. You give the babies too much, and you don't give 'em enough, and you don't bathe 'em, and you don't weigh 'em. There wasn't such a lot of talk in my time, but they grew up all the same. I said to my daughter, 'Look here, you let me alone, either I know what to do or I don't know what to do.' I used to give mine toast-water, that was all." She tucked up the lank pads of hair clinging to either side of her face. "You boil two or three crusts of bread . . ."

"Oh, I know," interrupted the woman with the drowned-corpse face.

"Mine has bronchitis," went on the ogress. "I wonder where he caught it. He never goes out and he sleeps close to the stove. I am going to try and see if I can't get a bottle of syrup . . ."

The folding-doors opened, a white-clad nurse made a sign, and all rose, each with the same enamored hugging-to-her of her wailing burden.

The crowd poured into an immense, well-heated room paved with white flag-stones and painted white. The light beat down hard through a row of bay-windows. At the far end presided a handsome old man in a white smock, an immaculate nurse at his side. "The doctor!" whispered the women in a tone of awed hostility. The man did indeed seem indifferent and just as God should be.

Spread out symmetrically on the bare table in front of him among other instruments was a complete apparatus of justice, bright and glittering—a set of scales with a basket and a row of copper weights drawing clamorous notes from the straggling music of the sunshine.

With remarkable dexterity the women undid the swaddling-clothes, turning, tucking up, unwrapping. The blonde swelled out her bosom as she stuck it full of pins; the ogress held her pins between her teeth. A suffocating odor of warm wool, sour milk, perspiration, and stale flesh arose amid the cries.

The line began to move. One after the other they went up tendering their children like poor plucked bruised flowers, with the idolatrous, skulking faith of believers approaching God.

From my bench, my heart frightfully wrung, I saw each showing me what I might make of my child . . . a baby with its neck seamed with a reddish crack . . . a baby with tiny, tiny limbs beneath an abdomen swelling like a bagpipe . . . a baby whose ribs striped its body like a zebra's hide . . . a baby with a back all covered with boils . . .

"He has green movements." "He has a swollen stomach." "He has ringworm." "He coughs." And the same slack answers to the doctor's questions: "I don't know.—I don't know.—I don't know."

The man cast his sovereign glance over the printed form held out to him, handled the little body, remained impassive while pronouncing his rapid decision, and took up the next case.

Among the lethargic flock who went away with bowed heads, some, to rally their spirits, mumbled the flesh of their babies with fierce kisses as if to take revenge and show that this man after all had done them harm . . .

I got up, dragging my double weight.

So this is the maternal infatuation which is so sanctified and revered. "I don't know.—I don't know.—I don't know." And I presumptuously was going to commit the same folly, I, who knew no better than they, who had not learned the unknown love awaiting me . . .

Why doesn't that man, the doctor, who *knows,* arise and snatch away these lives contaminated by the fond ignorance of the mothers, and proclaim that the instinct is fallible, fatal, even criminal?

Most of the women met me again under the porte-cochère, because I walked with difficulty. The one with the drowned-corpse face gave me a friendly little nod.

"You will see," her nod said, "it will soon be your turn . . ."

Yes, I know . . . To be a mother . . . In return for the gift of life, to have the right of death over one's child. And to use that right.

## XIII

A rending, moments repeated incessantly, torture indescribable, pain embedded in the body, battle, cruel cries . . .

I remember everything and every second. I remember the seconds when I gnawed at my bedclothes, when I howled like a wild beast. I remember all of them and others. I remember that none of them was ever the last, how the hours added themselves to the seconds in an excruciating, inhuman succession of throes in which my whole being set furiously upon itself, how I no longer had the strength to suffer.

I twisted my head from side to side like a dying animal in entreaty; I stifled it in the pillows; it was wet with perspiration; I felt a new convulsion begin and break like a wave. And when an infernal force tore me with a pang greater than all the others, I heard vaguely a cry that was no longer mine, a film passed over my pupils, I sank into an abyss sunlit and sultry. It was over . . . it was over . . . I fell asleep,

Did I remain in that state of lethargy and iner-

tia for long? When I opened my eyes the whiteness and blankness of the walls of my room seemed to be released by a spring. About me was a startling silence peopled with sibilant whispers. I saw women stooping, then disappearing with their arms full of linen.

My baby! My baby!

His father, exultant, held him out to me. I became fully conscious. But goodness, how ugly he was! The shrivelled face of an old woman, the profile of a vulture, a forehead covered with plushy mucosities, cheeks smeared as with the yolk of an egg, hands on the outside exactly like a bird's and on the inside creased and red. And real nails!

At the fontanelle the pulse beneath the skin throbbed terrifyingly, and the fuzz on his skull was skimpier than pin-feathers on a fledgling.

I took him in my arms, stiff and long in his swaddling-clothes. His eyes opened half way and showed a glassy violet with milky gleams.

Our child? We both in turn dropped timid solemn kisses on his downy cheeks made of a sweet smell, and I dared not say anything.

Well? . . . The call of the blood, the rejoicing of the flesh, the issue of love, the instinct, the lurid mother-instinct at last?

No!

## XIV

I should like to hold these things fast, for always.

I see them now as they really are, just as I see my son in his present form. But it is not enough to say: "I see them." I have carefully preserved all my pictures of him; I want to keep intact the memory of the heart he gave me.

This is not difficult to tell. Other feelings are too bound up with self for description. You'd have to explain a person's whole nature to understand them. Love is indefinable, grief is indefinable, but a mother's heart can open up like a book. It is uniform and simple, free from all alloy, and its very infiniteness is like finiteness.

My little boy is near me, awkwardly assaying his first steps in the garden. Without raising my eyes from my work I watch him and I thank him.

It is he. Although he changes from day to day, I know his ways by heart: the big curl in which the sunlight lies coiled, the almost imperceptible arch of his eyebrows, mere shades of lines, the red pollen blown on the petals of his cheeks, his profile of curves, his neck of mother-of-pearl, the spreading fan of his fingers, his unique form which is unique only to me.

I must rack my brain in order to force into my memory that once he lay hidden in my warm womb and I carried him as though he were one of my

organs, as though he were a secret, that I carried him as one carries a joy or a pain. I no longer remember this.

I am in a hurry for him to grow up and be able to listen; I should like to talk to him. I have found words for the others, though they awoke in me only an uncertain love and set my heart in chaos. He has given me an intelligible emotion, and to him I have said nothing.

I love him as I love no one, because he is the sole human being for whom I am *responsible*. My love is responsibility first and foremost. If he bends over, I suppress a cry; if the sun shines too strong on him, I shield him with my body; if he makes a new gesture, a slight disquiet flits through me. In whatever concerns him danger seems to lurk. He is a lively, approachable child, people like him, and when they come up and speak to him, I smile a pleasant, natural smile, though his life and his death keep up an incessant sport within me and incessantly it devolves upon me to secure his life. It is a tragic stake, a terribly cruel problem; it is the entire basis of mother-love.

He has run as far as the ivy thicket, thirty yards from my chair. I tremble so that I have to get up and leave my work. Every now and then he comes tottering to present me with a shaving of wood fished up from the sand he plays in, a big earth-coated pebble, treasure-troves of all sorts. "Look, mother." His attention flatters me.

If I were to disappear without leaving any-

thing? . . . Without leaving a will? Or suppose that from beyond the tomb I were to say: "Before you took your first steps your life was all arranged. In order that you should be happy I kept you from having dignity or a sense of justice. No need for you to undergo the bitter struggle that presses upon a man, the primordial cares of existence, honesty—honor, in short. Are you not my child? If I have taken trouble and pains it was to deprive human beings all for your sake. You will be exempted from earning your bread and pursuing an occupation. You will depend upon the labor of others, you will be under the delusion that you are distinguished from those upon whom you depend. That is the end to which my efforts will have served." But this is wrong, unwholesome, dishonorable.

When he is grown up into a tall young man whom people take notice of, shall I have the courage to look him in the face and say:

"You are not everything to me: you never have been my whole passion. I have cherished you on my knees, I have served you, I have idolized you. I have never deceived myself. I knew perfectly that in loving a child one gives without ever receiving. I have reserved the highest place for others. It is not to you that I have dedicated the essential thing in my life, its supreme reason, if a supreme reason can be found.

"Therefore you have the right to leave me. You must be finer, you must repudiate me. I bow be-

fore what you are. I free you from the duty in which children are cooped up, and I assume the duty myself. Whatever I may have done, never let my course of life be an example to you; there is no example; you, nothing but you, is what will count.

"You will have so much to do, everything I have failed to do. Go, keep your face set forward, never turn back. What were you born for if not to depart from me? To be sure, you are flesh of my flesh, but a part of my flesh that is unlike me, a contrary current that has emanated from me. . . . You say no to everything I am.

"Does it hurt me to see you disappear? Am I alarmed? Do I suffer? That does not concern you. *I was forewarned.* On the day you were born I was told that the tearing-away process would last as long as I last. We leave each other each minute. Your head mounts upward towards the heavens, mine draws closer to the earth.

"It is right and proper that this should be so. Without you, you know, my existence would be justified. It was not merely to bring you into the world that I was born. The thing is that your existence should be justified . . . No, do not delay. Life is nothing but a departure and every time one halts one commits treason.

"I shall have to come to understand many things, thanks to you. I have always tried to be clear and know myself, but when I went to the bottom of things, I mean to the bottom of myself, there always remained *another* soul, a rebellious

soul which refused to reveal its mystery, and I have doubted whether it is humanly possible to learn the truth of it.

"I was not mistaken. The real, unknown part of myself, my unreachable soul, is in your eyes. You will see through what I have got no knowledge of. If you beheld how I look at you! You are like the travellers who come from afar, from the lands of fable concealed under lovely names of gold. You resemble those travellers. Your eyes will see beyond the horizon in which I go astray. I tell you that of the two of us the one who ought to kneel, listen, and learn is not you.

"My little baby, I shall owe to you the sole love that is sorrowful and perfect, the love that neither barters nor expects reward. Since I have given everything, you will owe me nothing."

Shall I have the courage to say this to him? It will be hard perhaps, but already I find that it is a veritable grace from heaven to have twenty years in which to attain to such courage.

Here he is coming back, running this time and brandishing in his plump hand a twig he has broken off all by himself. He drops plump on his knees as on two round balls, all hampered in his clumsy race to me. His chubby cheeks are stained with crimson. He throws himself on me. "Mother," he lisps, the little flatterer. . . .

The mournful moment of a kiss, the exasperat-

ing moment of an abortive embrace, the fleeting moment of contact—he is gone.

## XV

The test has been made.

We have lived side by side in the heart of the country, we have done the humble things of daily life together, have shared its immediate exigencies, have enjoyed the wild spirit of long walks together, the redolent silence of the little wood, all the freedom written on the face of the earth and carried by the waters. After this we shall feel that the looks we exchange are sisterly, and I have the improbable hope of some day being able to say: "I have found a woman friend."

Her very name seems wonderful. Eva . . .

I met her in the office where I work. What a lovely vision the first day! You so rarely find strength blended with sweetness in a woman that her bearing seemed a little supernatural. It was merely self-assurance, however, and the majesty of perfect health that gave her her superb manner of treading the waves. You noticed her tallness and fearless vitality, and did not try to question her eyes for the secret being in her. This was fully expressed by her quick gestures, the smile of her frank lips, the fearless carriage of her head, the straightforward look of her beautiful brown eyes.

A sort of reserve established a connection between us at first.

I noticed her diligence, her desire to do well, and a something like heroism, which made her rush into the forefront of life and carry away a little more than her share of the burden.

Our silent understanding lasted for some time. Perhaps without our knowledge the intuition brooding in women brought us closer than words could have done. One evening in speaking of her home and saying how happily she looked forward to meeting her husband, she used a phrase so tender, warm and chaste that I caught a glimpse of the woman in her. Her face, always behind a mask of energy, turned gentle and serious as if veiled by serenity. I imagined a couple in her image, for it is the woman who makes or unmakes the couple. She must have achieved a deep marriage. . . . The weather was fine and bright, and we left for home together.

I think I shall always remember her pure voice, which revealed the restlessness of living like a burning bush hidden behind strength and youth. . . . I kept wishing we'd never reach the corner where we had to separate.

But there it was already. The red of the sky threw its glow on her face and spread an impalpable halo of dusty rays behind her. "Till to-morrow," she said. I almost ran off, my heart swelling with gratitude. I remember my eyes smarted.

That was several months ago. When we decided to spend our vacation together, I felt beforehand that we were going to be friends.

We made the rash experiment of bringing two couples, two poor couples, under the same poor roof. We did it and we were gay and happy in the doing. It makes you believe in miracles.

I do believe in miracles. It is not a miracle that this beautiful woman with the tanned cheeks walking beside me is the strongest attraction in the landscape because of the tall stem of her body, the dancing refrain of her steps, and the brilliance of her complexion. Other women have passed over the ageless earth who were as alive, as charming, as stirring. The miracle is that her brow is clear, her manner clean-cut, her gaze straight and sure and keen with intelligence; that she goes lovingly toward a love which she has built with her own hands; that she is free and strives to be sincere in her freedom. Our mothers knew not. The woman in us owes them nothing but our faults.

If you look at this woman carrying her will on her shoulders, leading her will on towards the realization of her inner idea, towards the simple desire to be brave, to love, to be truthful; if you see her passing in nature, if you see how she moves, how she takes into her being the keen sea-air and how aware she is of everything, the great eucalyptus, its gray-green leaves tossing in the wind, the ochre-colored slope checkered with vines, the sleepy languor of the lovely coast-line robed in blue, you can tell at a glance that our humanity is strangely new.

When she returns to her and her husband's or-

derly, flower-decked room, what a life she will stir up; what creative power, what inspiration, what harmony she will contribute to their relation.

Will she and I succeed in producing that supreme masterpiece known as friendship? Friendship between two women used to seem almost impossible to me. I have always seen women leagued against man. They meet only to connive, and when they meet, humanity divides into two camps with the woman's camp almost wholly devoted to the concoction of plots and lies. Two women together? Two enemies confronting each other. If they cease from their rivalry, it is in order to set traps for male weakness.

She turns round. "Quick, we ought to be back already." Her smile is so confiding and my heart so happy, she is so radiant, so wholesome and her presence is so forceful that some day, I say to myself, the name of friendship will have to be the same as of love.

## XVI

An arbor at the water's edge. Cool green leaves. Flowers. Boughs striped with sunshine. Close by, the peacefulness of a sleepy stream.

We had decided to celebrate our second wedding anniversary here. We rose early in the morning, set out arm in arm, keeping step, and came to this

springtime nook as if to a rendezvous arranged by spring itself.

The setting for our lunch was all it should be—the midday sun blazing down upon the surrounding country, the table garlanded with flowers, the scenery framed in the arch of the arbor.

Two years . . .

The afternoon passed tranquilly.

He was seated close beside me. I saw his profile against the bank and the misty line where the horizon was falling asleep. His wandering gaze was caught by everything and rested on nothing. He seemed to be summing up each breath of nature, each line, each feature, and he had eyes only—this being a day apart from other days—for the broad effects of the great stretch of landscape.

A halt. We count on our fingers, we hold a mental roll-call before turning back . . . Presently, when we start on our homeward walk, the great amphitheatre of vapors, the slope fringed with trees, the belt of mist will each one by one be making their quivering signs.

Two years. What has my love become, my hope, the spirit without end which dwelt within me? . . . We are two, that is all.

The same current of the spirit—if not the same spirit—drives its waves through us. The same flame—if not the same heart—mounts within us. The same love of truth—if not the same truth—throws the light of day between us. And nothing but silence is needed for us to be close and united.

We love each other better than ever; we no longer talk to each other.

Had anyone said to me the first day of our marriage: "You will want to explain everything to him, what you are, what you see, what you wish; you will want to find out from him what he is, what he sees, what he wishes; you will also want to find out what in both of you is reconcilable and perhaps, above all, what is irreconcilable: this is his concern or interest, this is your concern or interest, I should have nodded my head. "Yes, exactly."

But if I had also been told: "A day will come when you will have nothing more to learn of each other, nothing more to tell each other; without mutual explanations you will understand everything," I should have denied the possibility. I should have cried out that a whole century wouldn't be enough to bring two human beings into harmony, because human beings change from second to second. I should have said it was blasphemy.

But the day did come.

There is a region of soft azure outlines where words have been extinguished. *He* exists and I exist.

It is a little green arbor where nothing, in short, binds us together, neither the flaming leafage, nor the smell of invisible murmuring water, nor the languishing hour; neither the nights past and gone, nor the days to come, nor the little child asleep at home in his cradle. If anything binds

us together, it is the freedom that each of us has found, nothing else.

One must never say "This is love," for love is the heaven that the heart has in prospect, and the whole of space is yet to be traversed. . . . It is an immense feeling which speaks and impels you and is made up of certainty and clearness.

I am sure of him.

He might see a weapon of crime in my hands—or at least some symbolic weapon, something he holds a crime—without a shrug of his shoulders. Remembering that my tenderness is unfailing, he would say to me "all right," then he would come to me to find out why what I was doing was right.

And he is sure of me. He could leave us, his hearth, his love, his child, without so much as a glance back. I should merely say: "He had to go, he must submit to our love, and go his own way. That is how we love each other."

A moment at the foot of a hill, a great moment, so welcoming, so stable, and so peaceful that it is like an open doorway before which you must commune with yourself before entering. Two years gone by. Before me the rest of my life.

I have also had my doubts and fears. In the beginning I said to myself: "Will life allow such a love? What will become of this ardor and determination? And he, will he allow me to love him as my heart dictates?"

We have gone through daily cares together,

poverty, weariness, all the formidable common things. We got many laughs and more strength out of them. In the evening his step would sound on the dark landing; I would run to the door to meet his smile; he would kiss me; the hours would fly. . . . That is the way two years unrolled their seasons and brought forth their fruits, and we became strict with each other because perfection revealed her face to us from afar.

So, without a word said, by minutes added to minutes, by the divine simplicity to which one approaches, you reach the promised land and the very heart of love.

I say what I see. Life does allow all the ardor, all the sublimity of two human beings to flourish; and in their relation to each other she grants even the impossible. I say what he and I are.

With one accord we rise, we know it is time. Our child is waiting for us, our house, our to-morrows, a thousand impatient desires, and all the things you don't think of in advance.

We follow the line of the bank. Where to? I do not know, but I know it is sweet, very sweet, and his arm is linked in mine.

Ahead of us are two banks set with houses and edged with reeds sharp-edged and long as swords.

It gives you a sort of dizziness to follow the banks straight ahead without removing your eyes. These two lines, separated forever and mingled forever by the current, are fascinating.

A marvel. Is it not a marvel? An arch. Ris-

ing from the ground on either side, its loving, solid curve clasps both banks and brings them together in an embrace. Nevertheless they are like two convicts. Yet at one point they become a single bank; they touch, they merge. Then they go on, their bed widening out. In spite of appearances they are still closely united in order to sustain the deepening river which will place its mouth on the mouth of the ocean.

Yes . . . one more look . . .

Above the slope leaning down to lull itself in bliss, the sky has just enshrined a light cloud the color of periwinkles, and the arch resounds like an Hallelujah in stone.

Come.

## XVII

He entered.

I cannot say how I reacted to the first steps he took into my life. I have only a confused impression left. The man who entered was not one to whom I could be indifferent. He was an aspect of my own being which was taking form and moving outside myself without recognizing me.

He approached shyly enough. My heart rose . . . he approached . . . I felt vaguely that a large event involving me was taking place in far-off regions, and the shadow of his body spread an immense new something before my eyes.

I thought him very gentle. I noticed the metal-

lic clearness of his restless gaze, and that his figure suggested a great tree which dominates the other trees and lowers its branches so as not to be alone.

What was he going to do among these people, what attitude would he, the single sane person in the entire gathering, assume? How was he going to behave in this brilliant drawing-room filled with twittering women, dazzling lights, bare shoulders, ripples of laughter, and heavy perfumes?

I had tried hard to cut a figure but soon had to confess myself beaten. The women spoke a language not like the rest of the world's. Their vocabulary was limited to "masterpiece," "infamous," "divine," "diabolical," "delicious," "intriguing." In their presence an average, disgracefully normal, tame creature like myself without vices or virtues, had to keep mum.

The old gentleman advancing screened my escape from the group in which I had been trapped, and I managed to retreat to a safe corner, from which I saw the women fasten on him with a buzz of talk, a whole gamut of rosy bosoms and a great display of fireworks. . . . Further off the hostess was keeping a watchful eye to see that no one of the women distinguished herself too much. The elderly laughing gentleman must have been some one of importance . . .

The tobacco-laden air was gradually getting to be unbreathable. The noise pounded incessantly. I sat riveted to my chair without daring to move, as though a nightmare were upon me, the sort in

which a terrible load oppresses your chest, though you remain conscious. "I am dying, I am dying." The load weighs more heavily. "No, I am dreaming, I am going to wake myself up." But you are impotent; you can't shake the load off and you can't come out of the nightmare.

It was just as I was exerting every muscle and scrap of courage to escape from the oppressive spectacle—I had devised a polite pretext—when he entered.

The hostess went to meet him with her wide smile, her hand uplifted, and the phrase of greeting she had repeated at least twenty times since I had been in the room.

She steered him my way, threw out a rising syllable, a descending syllable, like two balls between our two faces, and then propelled him over to the group while I listened to the muffled echo of his name bury itself in my heart.

I forgot the smoke, the noise, my eagerness to leave. Even the weight lifted from my chest in the very way a nightmare suddenly takes wing and yields to a dream of clear, bright meanderings.

They did not pay much attention to him. The loud dame who presided over the group captured all eyes. She was plump and short; as she talked she flapped her arms like fins, and every now and then let out from her chest as from a great case a vibrant laugh, which sent undulations over her salmon-colored bosom. When she herself had

done laughing, she would cast her eyes about in quest of approval as though levying tribute from the faces. But when she encountered the newcomer, she had to stop because his frank gaze pronounced disapproval and denial.

How I wanted to thank him!

The company had been too much for me; it became too much for him. Soon I saw him cast about for a retreat. . . . For a second his eyes glided over me, I alarmed him as he had alarmed me. Then he slunk away, with the same crushed, crestfallen manner that I must have had.

He walked off . . . the curtain of palms . . . he disappeared.

By fits and starts the nightmare returned, clutching me with clammy tentacles. The noise fell in slabs, the weight on my chest suffocated me. Through a mist phantoms glided by, exchanging absurd bows, disjointed gestures, and disconnected remarks. A woman in a spangled gown with hair like flaxen wood-shavings turned and showed a chalky face. Others followed her, branded with painted red smiles. They were all hurrying. Refreshments were being served under the rotunda. The subdued clash of silver against glass sounded along with the clatter of china, little exclamations, and the shuffling of feet.

I am dreaming. Impossible that a gathering of human beings should be such an outrage on life, such a parody of it. When living persons come together and have attired themselves beautifully, it is for the interchange of what is best in them,

not for the spilling of gall and the raising of a hubbub. I must be dreaming.

Little groups were coming back; women's laughter cut the curdled air like sharp lashes.

Again I made a painful effort and rose. With the looks of the women riddling me and paralyzed by the men's attention, I crossed the room driven by a force that operated for me. I found myself beside him.

He raised his eyes slowly. Did he smile? I no longer know. But he looked—as I must have looked—as though he were gazing into light.

## XVIII

I have a new friend.

A friend . . . When I see him, it is like a revision of all I am, a kind of unusual sincerity that urges me on, amplifies me, and carries me toward him.

When he is away, I have the impression of having discovered a treasure within myself from which I draw in deep draughts . . .

And also of hymns striking up beneath my tread.

## XIX

"Why? Yes, tell me why you squeezed my hand so hard?"

I lean towards him, my head touches his chest. He is enraptured, overwhelmed, and as smiling as the night when it is about to pass.

He did not answer.

A silky wind blows down from a sheltering eminence and carves his face and makes me cling to him. Are we on the borders of the true silence, the ultimate silence in which human beings find themselves face to face? "You! You!"

A terraced garden. If this were another evening, I should be discovering in detail how beautiful the garden is. Each walk opens up a paradise, cool and secret as a spring, and the pebbles shine like glowworms. Borders of irises with violet fragrance dissolving among their stems, a profusion of spreading boughs, and near our bench a thicket from which at intervals darts the straight streak of a gray-bird's flight. Below us in the distant semi-circle across the fading daylight the sparkling apparition of a group of houses lighting up.

The sight of all this beauty fills me with such a glow—almost hurts me—because I feel *he* is looking at me . . . He says: "Your shining curly hair, your broad, clear forehead, your mouth, your eyes." Mentioned in his quivering passionate voice my hair, my forehead, my mouth, my eyes

are so new that I close my eyes so as to see them . . . And I did not know . . .

The garden has changed. Pale ochre reflections. Little shivers damp and creeping. Heavy black pockets on the parasol tops of the trees. The mournful andante of a swaying cypress. As though it were the first time, my beloved, that we were alone and had only found each other this evening under the narrow sky.

The shadows spread haphazard piling up in ridges, drawing after them dim white trails. Unknown thoughts escape from everywhere. They are too swift for me. The breeze carries them away. His face at my right, blurred except for the prominent features, is silvered over and turned into a medallion . . .

Am I quite sure that he is still close to me? I tighten my hand in his. The true, regular pulse at his wrist assures me all is well and down here everything is fair and *true*. The garden and the leaves, the multiplying lights of the town, the gloaming are all real.

The air is stirring and freshening up. Let us walk. Straight ahead of us as far as the last terrace with its ornamental balustrade; then we will follow the Broad Walk at the entrance of the garden.

He takes my arm gently. I do not dare to lean on it, though the weight of his presence bears me to the ground. I feel I am alone in upholding his life. Who will tell him, who will ever tell him the whole drama that this means? Will he ever know

how I see him, how he lives for me? Other people and he himself see his huge figure, always a little bowed as if he never dared to be altogether tall, the steel of his eyes, and the slope of his forehead, which every shadow exaggerates, and his gaze bemired in clouds. They may see his simplicity and transparent kindliness; but at this they stop.

I am caught in what is inexpressible in him. I assume all the questions a man may put to himself without being able to solve them, all the vague poignant evils. And when he appears, I feel that a word has been fashioned to express everything, but not a single word to express his face. It is too outside of everything, too mysterious, perhaps too like my own.

We are at the Broad Walk, a solemn pile in which the trees go two by two, close together, erect —a cathedral. A chilly silence lays a sheet on your shoulders, the nave boldly thrusts its black pillars upwards, and the branches topping the vault wed in the sky.

In spite of yourself you say something in a very low voice. "Up there, that red glow as through a stained-glass window."

"Tell me you love me . . . tell me . . . tell me you love me . . ."

He has said *me,* he has said *you,* as if it were possible to stand this shock on your breast without turning pale. He sees I am sinking and passes his irresistible arm about my body. The future tears itself to pieces at the bottom of my life. At the end of the Broad Walk the last golden ray

goes down in a black mass. I do not know how to say these things, but I raise my head like a slow remonstrance and I hold my gaze up to him. Have I said everything?

Let us return. I can go no further. He takes my hand and presses it with the warm strength of his fingers. It is limp and inert, the palm lifeless and cold.

What have I done to deserve this diaphanous gloaming, this prolonged rhapsody rising about us? I have loved once already, and that counts I know. But if I had not had this great passion to love another man, if I did not still have it, would my heart be so clairvoyant? Would the new evening be as mild as it is? But if in spite of my deepened heart, I am not yet all-embracing and big enough?

We have gone the full length of the Broad Walk and back. Have we really gone so far? Behind us the view retreats into the opaque distance, and the whole pile, as mournful as a church abandoned by God, fades away slowly beneath a pall of silence. Our walk is almost at an end. We still have to cross a deserted spot, where thin bushes hold up their charred arms to support the slanting line of the gold and black rays.

Does he see this high dizzy instant passing close within our reach? I might snatch it perhaps but for these mad throbbings, this veil over my eyes, the dryness of my lips. Only the fragments of the instant reach me, but even they are beautiful enough to dazzle me.

He stops and faces me and his gaze fixes on my throat. Doubtless he too is catching the fragments. . . .

What are you to do when you are a mere humble human being and have no power to retain the superhuman moments?

May my longing for truth at least flame out. My love of truth is my finest quality, my one merit. May it shake me as the wind shakes a tree, and may my hands, if they dare, rend these garments which hide me from his eye. Garments are a lie, and the moment is naked. . . .

He has understood. He trembles so visibly that I feel my breasts quiver like twin flowers and my whole being stir. He draws me to him and holds without daring to embrace me, small, panting, fainting away . . .

The pile has been swallowed up, the Broad Walk has turned black, the beautiful moment has fled through my fault; we have only a few steps farther to go. If I have nothing to give him, may he at least share with me the one idea I still retain.

This idea is the strange knowledge I have of my body, but of a body no longer mine, so lucid has it become, full of resonances, coursing blood, warmth and appeal . . . a body of mysterious flesh and tense limbs, as bright as a torch, as sensitive as a soul . . . a body I want to give him—my body and my arms.

## XX

"No, don't get up, stay where you are; it is I.

"You told me you were not going to work this evening, so I came. I want to talk to you.

"I am going to sit beside you, if you don't mind, on the cushion on the floor under the window, where I like to sit when it is as light as it is now.

"I hesitate, not because it's hard to say. On the contrary, it's too simple, and things too simple are beyond words to express.

"I really have nothing to tell you. You understood. You know. But it is right for me to come and right that the confession I want to make should revert to our love, for it has to do with our love.

"How you look at me . . . Your eyes probe to the depths . . . Yes. That is it . . . You do see, don't you? I love him.

"Perhaps the confession, which is so long, so long in beginning and has weighed so heavily, is already finished? . . . No. Since my eyes are overflowing, I have not yet made it. Well, listen, I have no idea any more of what I am going to tell you, but don't interrupt, let me say everything . . .

"Oh, I wanted to speak in orderly sequence, and I promised myself I should not be moved but would talk to you quite simply. When I came in, I felt I was growing and rising. I heard my own words stirring like live things . . . But they are

trivial; they hurt me so I wish I could find others.

"To think that here at this window we have so often talked of love, not of our love, but of all love. You remember? You used to say—I think it was you: 'What is beautiful is not the face you love so dearly, it is the need to love it dearly. What matters is not the delirium in which two people lose themselves, but the truth they discover.' And when you and I evoked those two rays of light which are one, love and truth, our words were so vast that we had to stop talking.

"This evening—do you know why?—instead of telling their splendid secret my words are mere splinters ripping my throat . . . Yet when we used to talk here, I did not know love was so beautiful; we did not say it was.

"You certainly saw the change in me, and you guessed. The morning when you stopped in front of me and restrained the exclamation in your breast, I was sure you knew. Perhaps it was very apparent. I came and went in a radiance; the house grew chilly, everything in the house was conscious of it and unnatural. Evenings I worked later and later, as if I were afraid of falling asleep, and when we discussed things, it was I who explained, I who knew. You must have seen, too, how often I buried myself in silence, content in it sometimes, then tortured.

"You observed me. There was no reason for speaking one day rather than another?

"A reason has arisen.

"It was yesterday evening. Walking beside

him I suddenly realized that in him, in us, in me, there was a sort of attraction; I responded to it—with all the strong, fine need of truth you gave me. It is this need of truth which brings me to you this evening.

"Take it, take it before giving it back to me. Don't let us ask whether it is more painful for you who receive it than for me who bestow it. Let us forget that man retains the proud authority of the male in his flesh and says "possess" as of a thing. Don't let us ask whether the union between man and woman is sublime to this degree. Let ours take that stand. One always has the time to suffer in, but there is only one time in which to love in truth.

"See, maybe it is at this very moment when my voice is worn threadbare and in spite of yourself you push my head away and hold yourself up as if you were about to fall, that we draw closer together than ever before.

"You are watching the night as it comes creeping . . . you see, don't you? There is no question, not for a moment, of parting, nor of my loving you less. Because our hearts are turned towards each other to-day. A miracle is taking place. It will not be undone.

"Listen to me. Listen to me as if you could understand. Let me spread at your feet the infinity I hold . . . Since he came, if you only knew, I love you more. Not only do I feel your smile and your whole presence around me like a thousand arms and with even more than one heart, but

I feel surer of myself, nobler, and—admit it—more beautiful . . . To love you is to think perfection, nobility, light, and to stretch my hands out to them. It is nothing else.

"To go to him is to continue myself; it is not to lessen you.

"But . . . Is it the dusk or the reflection of the tree? Your cheeks are ashen, your eyes are quite wet, and in spite of everything, in spite of everything I am hurting you . . . At the moment that you love like a God, you suffer like a man. . . .

"It is because our understanding is a high one that your grief is deep and my confession necessary.

"If you knew, if you knew. . . .

"You see, I still tremble before stopping just as I hesitated before sitting down, because once my confession is made we shall both feel that it is closed forever.

"Does one ever know whether one has not omitted the essential word, the life word, the one that means everything and has not been said? I no longer know. It is as if I still had it within me . . .

"Let me stay where I am, near you, for a long time. You will let my head rest on your knees, the night will succeed better than I in revealing the heart unseen.

"Perhaps he has come already . . . Tell me . . . do you hear him?"

## XXI

How happy I was! . . . I listened without stirring to the deep throbbing of his life. I came to know him better through the regular pulsing of his neck, the twisting of his arms and the warmth that passed between us than through our past meetings. All the warm invisible things that work in the depths of a human being, the changing fate, the mystery circulating in the blood, were talking into my ears.

Here we were alongside each other, breathing in unison—can you have enough of such happiness? I entrusted my entire being to him; it was a pure, holy fulfilment.

There's no use trying to sum matters up differently. It may be that at death you find the higher expression, the illumination so sought for, but the living have no other way of saying the truth to each other than through the flesh.

You understand, don't you, that you have to rest from living? No longer to have this gaping heart, this pitiless, relentless love, but simply to lie stretched out close against him, so that the whole universe comes rushing to you, the mystery reveals itself, and life finds consolation . . . Does God ever bestow greater charity?

I have just given him my life, my body, my very depths, and he is gone to sleep.

Then a human being never knows what another human being gives him?

Physical love joins nothing, leaves nothing. Nevertheless, it seems to bring everything, and it does bring everything at the red moment of embrace.

The joy at which I grasped has departed; my lips are dry, my arms empty.

Yet a little while ago I thought I was going to live like God. And to have had the hope of living like God for a single instant is in itself beautiful enough.

## XXII

"You really want to know what I am thinking of? And why I look so obstinate with my eyebrows projecting like a black roof over my eyes?

"I was working out an idea, the sort of idea that seems silly when you try to express it, but is really quite reasonable and logical . . .

"Why do you insist upon my telling you? I assure you it's so simple that you, a man, won't understand.

"Well then. I was thinking of your wife . . . No, don't interrupt . . . the woman who shares your name, your home, your meals, the money you earn, your cares; the woman who lives beside you —here's the one wrong—in utter ignorance of your love for me.

"I was imagining—this is where the vagary

commences—a meeting between the two of us, not a meeting of constrained smiles, not the confrontation of two human beings, with elements of the dramatic and the divine. Do try to follow me. Put together the details I am going to give you one by one the way they are in reality. Give the extraordinary interview the ordinary setting of humble, banal, tame everydayness. I told you it was a silly notion.

"I go to visit her. The interview takes place amid her familiar accustomed things, which assist and protect her. She sits beside the window—her little sewing-table, her work-basket, a dozen scattered articles. She sews without thinking of much, in the broad daylight so dazzlingly brilliant that you can't see the swing of the pendulum. Her head is bent, the sunlight grazes her neck. You feel her spirit is with her needle and thread, that is, crystallized in calm. Her tranquillized body submits in advance to the impending visit. She has only to lift her eyes to know the limits set to her being, the very boundary-line of everything she awaits.

"I enter. I go to her. My steps erect a hedge of sound around me. To make myself seen I raise my voice . . . How make myself heard? I do not know . . . Since truth is triumphant, the announcement of my presence may be triumphant also. It may write 'I love him' all over me before we shake hands or even give each other the first look.

"She knows. She knows everything. I feel bathed in a vast thankfulness. Just imagine: when people talk of you, she is the only one in the world who knows down to the very roots of her being the full content of their words. It is as if I were speaking to God.

"Well, I begin. Laughing, crying I impart what cannot be imparted. I hurry. The words flowing from my lips warm me with their generous wine, and I hear love pouring forth.

"I see myself, almost on my knees, scarcely perceiving her. Is it to her that I address myself? I speak merely in order to remove a barrier obstructing the light and to say the truth.

"In the breathless words that I pour out at her feet it is not a question perhaps of either her or myself. Why should it be? I never considered that I was doing her a wrong. If she reads my face, she will see things as they are. Have I turned anything away from her, have I diminished her portion, have I deprived her of anything? I have simply given you everything.

"Don't say she might repulse me and would be right if she did, because that, after all, would be the human way to act. Human to you means everything that deceives itself and denies the essential grace, everything that falls and dies in the mud of the road. Are you quite sure that a woman when she loves does not feel that sort of humanity die?

"You look at me dubiously. Of course you can-

not know. You men tolerate an understanding between two women when it exists for the sake of cherishing the dust-covered memory of a man. A tomb reassures you. You will never allow life as a pretext. According to you we have no right to a sisterhood until it is too late.

"In my unfailing and fatal sincerity I say your wife might understand. Truth striking the ear is bound to impress. And that I should be alive as I am alive at this moment, with the eloquence and magic that spring from real presences, is also bound to impress. Look at me. Need I say a single word? Isn't a great love with eyes uplifted convincing?

"When you tell me sometimes that I am beautiful, it is like a gift. She would see me bearing this gift, and if she perceived her forty years moaning and fading at my approach, she would understand that age in a woman is an offense love cannot forgive.

"Your eyes are searching space. You are wondering where such a conversation would lead her and me. Don't bother. It would merely lead me to the side of truth and her to its summit. I imagined that was enough and one could stop there.

"I imagined that after I had spoken, she would rise and stand without taking a single step, upright and solemn, her work at her feet, she would feel the morals of the world collapse, its false hells, its hardness and harshness, its monstrous

delusions, everything that sheathed her in a coat of mail and incited her to self-defense . . . Feeling her heart set at liberty, she would think of you, but of you with your body sloughed; of your real self hidden where neither she nor I can penetrate.

"Then she would draw nearer—would she know to what? It is a deep-seated law in us to try desperately to approach something. She would rediscover the dazzling moments when her twenty years of age gave her the power to bid the submissive universe do everything for your good. It would be a similar instant that I would place like a sheaf of wheat in her open arms. Don't you see?

"The room sparkles in all its sunlight; every surface sends forth gleams; the day calls to the day and floats before her. Are we rivals? We are simply sisters in the same love. I want to take her hands because I remember that once you chose her . . .

"Well . . .

"But my notion is squelched. I couldn't help it. Your astonished expression squelched it. Before I spoke, when the idea was still imprisoned behind the wall of my forehead, it gave me a light like a torch, I assure you. You questioned me, and now it's a mocking will-o'-the-wisp, teasing me from a distance and vanishing as I advance. Didn't I tell you it was an idea not to be handled?

"I have fallen short of caressing a bit of truth

between my clasped hands. It escaped me . . . And you smile consoled."

## XXIII

Twice we said we would part at the turn of the road, at that tree, exactly at that tree, and twice we passed by laughing at our weakness. We still could not believe in the separation at hand.

But the moment was upon us.

There, at the house hidden behind the trees and bushes, you will go on, and I will stand still.

He pressed my hand with increasing tenderness. My laugh taunted us with so much assurance that I tried to believe in it. To fill up the gaps, we blustered and said the needless inconsequent things people always say when they face a long separation.

It was a little before noon. The sheeted shadows cast by the sunlight burned and smoked in bluish waves. Between the trees of the woods stretching beside the sea liquid flakes blinded your eyes. You'd see annoying red spots long after you'd turned your eyes away.

I said to myself: "Only a few steps more and it will be over. One step less and another minute will be plucked from our parting." To keep down my emotion I hurriedly spoke of *something else.*

It must have rained in the morning. When we brushed against the branches, the silence was broken at our feet by the limpid sound of falling

drops, the leaves wore a new skin, and the atmosphere, impregnated with freshness, smiled the smile of nature when she wants to dry her tears. The depths of the woods were enveloped in a blue down; a troop of squat little fir-trees, their skirts on a level with the ground, rang a crisp chime.

We hurried, so at one in our approaching distress that we went too fast. The house behind the trees and bushes came into more prominent view —shutters like eyes pitilessly closed, pointed teeth of a gray-painted fence, threatening minutiae of a garden descending a bushy battered skull of a slope. But after all, there can be no such thing as separation between us two. . . . And for a moment, to prove the strength of love, yes, for a moment, I was ready to run.

Here we are at the house. Seen at close range with its covering of red tiles and rugged face and front fanned by two dwarf firs, the little house in the way of our free career does not seem very imposing.

It must be. What's the use of delaying any more? Is it saddening to part when each carries away the other? For I carry away your voice, and the sadness of your eyes, and this kiss I give you. . . . I do not leave you; I am not even distressed. Look, I am leaving you.

I took a few steps away. They rang under my eyes. I picked up every detail of our parting and held it pressed against my heart, each grain of

red earth, each flash of mica in the road. It was not so difficult . . .

Behind me I heard him walking away with a tread heavier than mine, which seemed to set stones tumbling down a mountainside . . . Two months . . . What is an absence of two months? I decided not to turn around.

The road narrowed and became a serpent of clay, then a creamy winding. I tried so hard to think of nothing that I noticed a great many surprising things we had not observed before. That tree with a heavy black ball at the end of its longest branch which the birds of heaven had stuffed with earth and was now grass-grown; the slope with a red covering of rich plants made, you'd think, of fingers dipped in blood. . . .

It was in spite of myself that I faced about. A dark figure just this side of the last bend in the road.

Ah, he turns round; he heard me. Could we remain apart? I stretch my arms out to him, I begin to run. Why did we talk of other things a few minutes ago? Were we insane? . . .

I have already passed the dead aloe, I am near the house with its two firs. My abrupt race swells my decision not to leave him. I lift my eyes. He didn't see me.

His form is no more than a black point, a blind insect nibbling at the road and entering the earth's lair. . . . One last step. It is over, it is over.

My arms fall, I turn back stumbling, dizzy.

How can you tell what sort of a road it is when the sun is the color of mourning and the summer has the taste of tears? . . . Doesn't he know?

Noon. The Angelus tosses its twelve bronze strokes at the sun and they slowly dissolve. But I am insensible to everything. Everything. The host of trees, the flashing breastplate of the sea turn around an empty space.

Why this sky stretching out after the branches, why this sparkling happiness, why this sleepiness of the earth when I am racked and branded with a red-hot iron by what I failed to say while there was still time?

# BOOK III

## *BECOMING*

# I

I HAD been counting the days until I could call the day I was yearning for by its name, a name new to me every morning. To have said good-bye for two months, to have lived apart so long and almost without news, and now finally to be able to caress the ardent moment which gives each back to the other, if only for a short space; to caress it as you hold your hands up to the fire. By a great effort I succeeded in remaining calm.

I had put my house in order, filled my vases with flowers, and made myself beautiful. My velvet gown dulled the light, so that by contrast I seemed to have a halo round my bared neck.

The hour drew near. The clock struck. But, no, the clock must be fast. . . . The next moments stabbed the silence, dragging on leaden feet. I went to the window. On turning back into the room, I was delighted to discover a few things to do. The little round corner table was standing tipped, there were too many leaves in the bouquet . . . and this wisp of hair straggling down my cheek. No, he was not coming. Waiting is a death died over and over again.

At last. . . .

To think I could have breathed till now! You! He moved toward me rather timidly, almost as if

he were a stranger. It occurred to me that he was not familiar with my home. A panic seized me: he might not like it.

But in one bound I was close to him, my head on his shoulder and his arms around me. I forgot everything. "I am so happy, so happy." We found ourselves in my little room, where the flowers piercing the twilight opened wide their mock hearts. . . .

But how he had changed; his face had grown thinner. . . . Why that overcast brow, that look of depression, that manner of not being at home? . . . What was the matter with him? . . . What was the matter with him?

Though there had been no time for conversation, and we had merely exchanged awkward, random questions, I felt suddenly that our hearts had ceased to beat in unison.

He should speak. I must know! Nothing is worse than not knowing. . . .

"I'll tell you," he began, resting his head on his hands. He had suffered too much by our separation; he had realized this forcibly again just now when he entered my home where everything dispossessed him; he could no longer live without me, so far away; he needed me all the time, every minute. Oh, he knew there was something irrational in his entreaty, but all he had was plain common sense. "Listen to me," he said, "there's an instinct, an instinct stronger . . . but you don't understand . . . there . . . I've told you everything .. . that's all."

He began again. His expostulations breathed an awful storm; while an icy clearness and a terrible calm rose in me. Fear crept into me down to the very marrow of my bones. What could I say to a man who suddenly talked another language? All I had was the words we used to. . . .

"Answer me, I beg of you, answer me, even if it is no, but answer me. . . ."

Did I have to begin all over again—give everything and explain everything all over again? Until then I had been carried along on the sustaining bosom of a powerful stream. Now a torrent furiously discharged its troubled waters and infernal foam into the even flow, and I had to fight my way back up against the current in a desperate life-and-death struggle.

So it seems that the bonds of flesh make mock of you; instead of uniting, they detach, leaving each of you to wrestle and paralyze the other's limbs like entangling undergrowth.

And does it seem that the bonds of the spirit are not strong enough because they always lack some link or word or look?

If it were not that I had found complete harmony with another human being, I should have doubted whether a man and a woman could ever love, that is, ever understand each other.

The thought inspired me with supreme strength. A hot wave kissed my mouth and ears; I pushed him away.

His wife. She was the first consideration. Remembering her gentleness, I spoke of her gently.

To be with me he could give up twenty years of his life in common, twenty years of attentions and indulgences, twenty deeply rooted years. She was a frail loving woman who had once been beautiful; she was nearly forty, which in a woman is to have no age. . . . Wouldn't my presence, consequently, result in hurting another woman? . . . And would I do such a thing, I who brought so much warmth of feeling and enthusiasm to what was beautiful, right, and high-spirited?

"In loving you I wanted everything about you to be brighter, easier and more perfect; and just when I rapturously believed I had succeeded, you come and brusquely ask me to remove the light from another being. That's what you are really asking me to do.

"More. The man in whose name I built my house—don't be afraid it's his suffering I dread; I love him enough to rise above pity. But I thought I told you that he is necessary to my effulgence; you understand, necessary. . . . Remember, he is the one to whom I told the truth, in whose presence I could live while at the same time holding your presence, who has suffered through me without loving me the less, and prefers my happiness to his own heart's happiness. That's the sort of man he is. That sort of man exists. And you would deprive me of him!

"But if, to get me away from him, you were to offer something superior, a more perfect means of elevating me and teaching me to *know,* I should go unafraid, perhaps without hesitating. Love is

the thing that elevates life. . . . But you, what do you offer? Feeling, instinct. Instinct is not a reason. . . ."

I had risen while speaking. My cheeks and forehead were burning. His face, plunged in the snowy curtain, was quite changed. Was it the look in his eyes or the folds around his mouth?

"Then you don't love me? . . ." He repeated this like a child taken with the words, and dropped his head in his hands.

That the light fell about me in gray veils may have been only a fleeting phenomenon. It cannot be that love will desert you suddenly.

The rest of his stay was of no avail, and when awkwardness fell between us, he rose, pressed his hands down on my shoulders, and gave me a long, sombre stare. Then he left. I heard the door close slowly.

Then he doesn't understand? But the love I feel for him is a true love. It is not that unstable impulse which passion carries off in a puff of wind. My love, like my life, craves all the victories I have gained, all the people who are dear to me. And my eyes take in whatever they can of sky and color. . . . Nothing forbids me to breathe. Why am I forbidden to love whatever I love?

My love, you will conquer, you will make yourself understood. You are not this man who is leaving, nor the other man, nor anyone; you are a heart of flesh exposed . . . a restless heart without limit, a heart forever beating and forever aimless. Do not let a single one who has ever

been with you fade and drop away. If love cannot conquer, what else is there to resort to?

And I ran out to overtake him.

## II

Only a few months since the first day of the war, yet I cannot recall one thing about it.

What I know is, that until the end it will remain the outstanding day of my life, the day of days. No matter what happens later, we who have lived through it have drunk at one draught the dregs of all the centuries, we have borne all the thunder of the heavens on our shoulders. Those who ask "Why exactly us" do not know that misfortune is always waiting to extort its tax.

I do not speak of the older people, those of the *other* generation, of the other age: they have not been touched.

But we, we on that day!

After all, I can recall several words and impressions, but they are no more illuminating than the way my folks used to describe the day I was born. "You looked like a little red monkey, you didn't cry much, your grandmother was the first to kiss you, it was a dreadfully hot evening."

And I can also recall Mr. Barret's gray stony face, his huge, petrified figure, when he entered the office where we were talking and regaining a little hope. "It's here!" he discharged from the doorway. None of us gave any sign of under-

standing. "It's posted on the bulletin boards!" he shouted, and advanced into the room like a weapon about to descend.

As a field of wheat catches fire stalk by stalk until the whole is in a blaze, so we caught fire in our stupor, each spiked to the ground by his own flame.

Fire! Fire! Moments of scarlet, strangled breathing, souls cowering in bosoms, horror, too much horror already, wide-open eyes staring into space. . . .

I remember I had to lean against the wall, and other trifling incidents, but my impotent dismay, my realization of all the folly let loose upon the world no more come back to me than the taste of the first gulp of life at birth.

I must have kept a clear brain and steady legs, because I ran straight home. . . . What street, what hell, where was I? . . . I had no eyes for the street nor ears for the humming in my head, nor consciousness even of the daze that was driving me on.

We met in front of the house whose quiet walls still enclosed our happiness. We passed under the porte-cochère heavily, passively, like beasts driven to slaughter, and the staircase was an ascent to Calvary. I do not think we exchanged a single word. When the door closed upon us we embraced without kissing, and my cheek against his shoulder was wet with tears that were not of my shedding.

It had occurred to me that he might leave for

the war, but like every other thought this one too was promptly chilled and crushed. Nor can I say that it was the idea of his going that made me suffer the most. I was stupefied beyond the power to suffer. I was just as ready to burst out laughing or tear off my arms. I let myself be touched, handled, and moved like a stone thrown into space. But contact with him restored me a little, a very little, to the realization of what I was going to lose.

The days succeeding were spat from a volcano; nothing remains of them but ashes. You learned new words; a whole language born of the moment slipped from your tongue; countries became persons with distinct individualities, gestures and features. You actually fed on what appeared in the newspapers, picking up items like grains of manna. Men alone counted—men, men. Life was in their hands, life and the fate of the world. So and so many killed—abstractions with which the world juggled in figures. Death, a human divinity after all, settled down familiarly. Nothing was like anything that had gone before.

People began to talk of glory. . . .

A day came: his departure.

I got his things ready as I always did before a trip, from a list, with my usual mania for taking along too many things. After filling his bag with all the necessaries, I stowed a tiny bottle of my perfume in it, a cigarette-case, his last birthday gift, some dried flowers, and our baby's photograph. I childishly pictured his exclamation of

delighted surprise when he would remove his shirts and the picture would fall out.

Before he left the house, hardly recognizable in his uniform, he kissed his son savagely and pressed him long and hard, bending low to hide his tears. . . . On the way he spoke mostly of the child—commonplaces to deaden his pain. "Don't let him be too much of a bother. You must be strict with him, you know." I saw he was entrusting his share in his survival to me, and it was better to avoid reference to a parting that marched on to death.

Regiments were springing up on all sides, troops of men with innocent eyes and faces shining with pride; sons, brothers, lovers, changed into statues of men, in a confusion of brass bands, cheers, red and gold, clashing of arms, and tramping of feet.

If only this were hell in its completeness! But he was not there. He had left six days before without my being able to say good-bye to him.

There was the last kiss, the fixed, tangible second when you part for good and the yard of space between you actually counts. You were two bodies clasped, then you became only one body, two arms . . . a soul locked in a leaden coffin.

There were the wretched minutes when you summon all your illusions to your assistance. "Nothing can possibly happen to him . . . of course not to *him*. . . ."

I returned, dragging my misery like a chain. I was one of the vast herd which fretted the surface

of the earth like a canker, moulded and moved by a deadly maniac hand. . . . Never before has there been such a herd.

Being a woman, I felt withdrawn from the herd, exactly as I had felt on the first day of the war that humanity was cut in two—men and women.

I was impotent, curdled, set aside. Like the other women I passed by the young men with orders to die and only a few days to live, though their bearing was of men who had long to live. I passed by the other women, useless flesh of the earth, faint-hearted flesh for grieving. . . .

I went. . . . In another sense it was the herd that passed by, that she-thing, in countless numbers, dancing bacchantes with hideous hyena-laughter and robes smelling of red blood and heavy wine, compliant. . . .

You no longer saw yourself, because you had been swallowed up in a living craw.

Where were you, my sisters from everywhere, women of Europe, you, Trude and Clara and Mania? What were you doing? Were you weeping?

You saw, didn't you, that bloody sky with forked black signs, that summer swooning away, that day? . . . Why was not your voice heard in denunciation of the universal slaughter?

Why was not my own voice heard, when there were outcries in my throat, tears in my flesh?

## III

I am becoming horribly accustomed to going about the empty apartment alone. I find I no longer think of the scowling walls, the dumb silence, the dim windows. They wrap me in a vague acquiescence. Habit is exerting its awful power.

I seem to be gliding down a slope where there is no one at the bottom to warn me that there may be a precipice ahead or tell me whither this strange existence leads.

My days are regulated according to the rules I myself have made to apply only to myself; I go, I come, I turn the key in the lock; I loiter; then I rush at my work. Sometimes the mirror casts a sudden image which runs away busily at my approach. My shadow and the creaking under my tread are all I have for company.

Yet this is not the first time I have lived alone. There once was a room with a flowered quilt, a moth-eaten carpet and a rickety door which opened like the lid of a devil-in-the-bandbox on the mahogany wig and scarlet smile of Mme. Noel. But everything was so different! I brought nothing to that virgin space except the desire to fill it; my body knew nothing; my inner being cried out for too many things to be able to hold any of them, and had I dared, I would have stretched my arms out through the window to embrace the air of life. . . .

My solitude now is like rotten fruit; it scorches

my entrails like a fiery drink. It is a strange solitude.

Two men peopled my life and fertilized and vivified it. But wasn't that very long ago and somewhere else? Come, try to remember. . . .

I do not know; they are neither dead nor alive. To be sure they are hungry and thirsty and get bored as living people do, but they are locked up in the earth's carcass like the real dead; and it may be that at this very moment when I am imagining them warm and active, they are already stiff and cold. To be absolutely truthful, to go down to the bottom of things, there is scarcely anything in common between the two men who went to war and me who stayed behind.

Sometimes when I am alone, I lean over, way over, to touch the very bottom of things so as to feel the pain of it.

Yes, letters pass between us. When I read their letters I try to imagine their surroundings and the crass details of their life; the fir-trees of the Argonne, the name of a regiment which I know by heart like a prayer, frost-bitten feet, the incessant thunder, and the arrival of the postman which draws us a little closer together. Then there is Carency—the place makes no difference—the light cavalry. . . . Attack, formation, the first rank mowed down, the second, the third; he alone standing upright in the front of the fourth rank, a struggle lasting a century, the confused subsidence, and my portrait snug under his blue jacket. And that night last week when he

was nearly dying of thirst and crawled out over the open field, groping for something to drink. A miracle, a pool! He fills his mess cup and empties it at one draught. He spits out thick threads, they hang from his mouth—bits of brains. . . . A pool of human blood from which he has quenched his thirst.

I receive a letter nearly every morning. The envelope burns in my fingers: the written lines make a pretense of talking and telling you things, as if I were not standing in front of him as you stand in front of a window-pane which you frost with your breath so that you can't see what's on the other side.

I write to them before I go to bed. Nothing important ever turns up, so I make a lot of the little every-day affairs—what happens at the office or at lunch in the restaurant where the people discuss and wrangle and the smells turn you sick. I tell them how forlorn the house looks, and how well the child is getting along in the country, that I do some work after dinner to make a little more money. Besides, there's always some anecdote to relate. . . . Twelve strokes cutting into the metallic night. . . . Sometimes when I fold my letter I have a sense of having written about somebody else.

Nevertheless, the thought of them is an obsession; it is a red point about which I develop and revolve and add to myself.

And sometimes, too, when I shut my eyes, bizarre notions swoop down on me, a horrid swarm

of bats. "How many women are there tonight," I wonder, "who are tossing about in the thin warmth of their beds, distracted creatures, tormented, empty-armed, who, however, are the bigger for all this, easy in their minds and free already in their bitter freedom?"

Yes there are many women tonight without husbands or lovers who wonder as they lie in bed; then they sit up and lean on their elbows . . . they don't *know* yet or suspect anything . . . but they don't sleep, they can't sleep; it's too absurd to think that a woman can live all alone, sleep alone, even breathe. And then it might be that the closest union is a prison after all.

At last I fall asleep, and in the morning, in the bald, shivering twilight, I go back to my doings of the day before, somewhat cowardly doings. Dull habit, which greases the machinery of life, leads me blindly along the streets to the office.

Was it only two months ago that with despair in my heart I passed this corner where the chestnut-stand sends up its whistling steam? His letter in my bosom had told of the night attack and of his possible death; a brief, heart-rending farewell. Is he in less danger this morning, is he less cold, less hungry? I just passed the same corner worried for fear I might be late. The whole way I had been thinking of my dress and winter hat.

That's how you get used to the martyrdom of others.

Even if it is the flesh of your flesh that undergoes the martyrdom, even if it is the man of your

love—ah, don't say no—you get *used* to it. In suffering one person cannot take the place of another, and pain cannot be shared. The first day, because grief turns your head, you think you are sharing the other person's pain, but the other days, all the other days?

Why not have the courage to look crude reality crudely in the face? There are no people who are inseparable, there are no couples who are inseparable.

He is in the trenches, the men are in the trenches, engulfed in misery, exposed to danger, plagued by vermin, and I am here alive and untouched, grazing this large wall patched with three-colored placards. "Women . . . your noble rôle . . . noble work . . .honor . . ."

Honor? What honor? I work. Isn't that natural? He is suffering, he is going to die. Didn't I see my own dormant energies wake up? And if he has given all, have I not taken all?

Five minutes to nine! I hurry, raising my coat collar in a shiver and clasping my hands inside my soft muff.

At the end of the street a dusty gust driving a handful of people along like dead leaves, women with billowing skirts, a tramping, whistling gang of blue-lipped street boys, and old Noël with his breath frozen on his beard.

*They* have left. Even if they return, they have left. That's the whole thing. There will have been a space of time when they were wiped off the

face of the earth, and life went forward without them, was lived without them, and women actually *continued* without them. . . .

## IV

The typical young lover, well built, good-looking enough but without charm; his youthfulness armed with a timid pretentiousness. I had always avoided talking to him, but this evening he got hold of a foolish excuse for walking home with me. I tried hard to speak of something else and quickly switched the conversation on to another track when it took a certain turn, while he, a hundred times more proficient than I, certainly more obstinate, dragged the subject back to where he wanted it to be.

The eternal comedy of man. The same words —who will tell them that they always use the same words?—to reach the same goal. He made awkward, crafty attempts, watching me out of the corner of his eye, and when he saw I was escaping, he declared himself, throwing up his dice and staking his very heart. His voice was rusty, his nose pointed downward, his ears were fiery.

Until then he had seemed fatuous, almost ridiculous in his little perfidy. Now he was ennobled, like a saint, pure, supplicating. His whole body took on grandeur. How he trembled, the poor boy!

When my answer was given—a woman who

doesn't love has a lot of ease and gentleness at her command—"Forgive me," he said, "I have offended you."

I watched him as he walked away, his back bent, humiliated, I suppose, but bathed all the same in the hope that rises from the words you dare to utter.

Forgive him! As if any woman ever harbored bitter feelings against the man who gave her the great gift, as if a single one of us ever remained untouched, as if a mysterious yet positive connection did not establish itself the moment love was declared.

I remember all the men who ever loved me. Each thinks he has discovered you, and offers you your secret. Each does in fact discover you, and also kisses you a little.

I shall remember this young man, too; I shall remember the strip of mackerel sky showing above the street crossing; I shall remember the stammering mouth whose youth demanded its satisfaction from mine, the mouth that touched mine in thought.

## V

I have had the sensation of death.

Not in the instant of dying; that is still a part of life; but in the instant after death.

I had gone to the end of the pier, where the water lashes incessantly and regularly, and seated myself facing the open sea. To right and left the

green shore curved and the fir-trees ran down toward the sea to hold in the pale sandy strip edged with foam. Over my head the procession of clouds.

Sunday morning. The voice of the chimes from the old church, buried in the heart of the island, was music sent by the air and tinted blue by the waters. At each stroke you expected to see space divided in two.

The sea was smooth and sleek with dark, wide, winding oily tracks, which looked like roadways traced by the sure finger of God.

Looking down at my feet I saw a sparkling play of meshes of rainbow light. The iris fragments dented the surface, formed into chains, made a covering of diamond facets, and drew downward full rainbows resting on myriads of arches. It was an incessant disappearance and reappearance.

It was fascinating to watch. The only thing that distracted me was a swarm of miniature fish darting under the pier more lightly than insects. For a moment they showed dove-colored, then orange; then they melted away. You tried to fasten your eyes upon one of the cells of water, just one. You had it, but no, it was another one.

The sun was so hot you couldn't lift your head. A broad sunbeam falling perpendicularly on the hard surface of the sea cut it in a blinding fissure, which attached the foot of the pier to the horizon.

Caught between the heat pouring down from

the heavens and the freshness rising from the water, my body lost its sense of weight, form, equilibrium, and even of breathing. Every bit of feeling was gone from my legs, my neck was burning. My soul and eyes existed for nothing except the stable yet ever-changing mosaic which laughed a thousand laughs at the face of the sky.

There was nothing but light. Substance, eyes, body, memories, all seemed to be losing themselves and making a plunge into light.

There really was one moment in which I ceased to be. My existence underwent a momentary eclipse. I was no longer some one obstinately facing a realm of infinity in order to measure its limits, a very small creature who wanted to add herself to nature. I was the immense, permeating idea of the ocean, the sun and the sky.

It was between the singing ether and the silvery water that I seemed to foresee my nothingness, because when consciousness left me and I ceased to be, the sparkling eyes of the sea formed again, the blue oily tracks unfurled themselves, the glittering fissure sucked in the same line, the blue deep followed its unchanging course. Everything kept on behind me.

## VI

Nothing but women. . . .

Not a single pretty one. Two, four, ten, a hundred . . . there must be two hundred. . . . Not a single pretty one. . . .

To be sure, the weak unsteady light discolors their faces and throws drab blotches around their features, but that alone does not account for the general stamp of dullness which makes them seem like a flock of widows. The two men sitting apart on the crosswise bench like well-behaved children who have just been punished, have a sorry air, not at all the air of having done it on purpose.

I am impatient. A woman addressing other women. . . . What is she going to tell us? Will the audience brighten up?

I am standing with my back to the platform facing the door to keep watch for Eva for whom I am reserving a seat beside my own. . . . Alas, something for a merciless eye to feed upon! I can hardly bear to look at that uncultivated field of dingy heads. But there is nothing better to turn to—moldy walls picked at and peeling, smeary stains on a colorless floor. Your ears are pierced by a rising babel.

Eva at last. . . . I draw a breath of relief and feel, as I always do, like saying "Thank you" to her. Great floodgates open, my poise is restored—a living proof. . . . Why this blitheness? Because of her smile, her radiance, her frankness, the glory she carries about with her from the clear image of her child and husband? I do not know. She exists, that's all. When I think of her, I have a complete sense of happiness and confidence. . . . Perhaps this is friendship.

She has a little trouble making her way through the hall. Her head, set in velvet, rises above the

field of heads like a taller, brighter stalk; the precious gems of her eyes show in full. She sees me, her face brightens. . . . "Thank you," I say, very low just to myself. After all there will be one fine face in the room.

We had scarcely shaken hands and seated ourselves when silence fell, broken here and there by coughing.

The speech.

The woman making the speech is also ugly. Yet what resources in that ample body. Under the armor of her corset, there are fine, noble lines, I am sure. Under her sausage sleeves there are the arms of a mother, even perhaps of a woman in love; the huge pancake on the nape of her neck shows she has long shining hair silky to the touch; and what tenderness in the depth of her eyes which dart glances in our direction. If she dared, what sweetness. . . .

She came to speak to us from a platform for the purpose of conveying her idea and a little of her soul, unaware that a valiant soul is a visible soul. The only means we have of showing our souls, sharing them and giving them freedom, are the ordinary means—our actions, the bare flesh of our lips, the sincere tears of our eyes, our bodies which encase our souls, our smiles which beautify our souls, and our voices.

This woman's soul is a strained voice, but how marvellous. The rows in the audience remain stationary, each head staying fixed in the position it held at the first word she uttered.

The women's horrid cares, their marketing, their husbands, their children, their dishwashing, their difficulty in making ends meet, all the everyday trifles that weigh on women and enslave them, are driven far away. The pale blonde with faded eyes beside Eva probably made the same O of her mouth when she spelled out her letters as a child. The old woman nodding "Yes, yes"—the two plumes in her bonnet respond "Yes, yes"—has forgotten her stupid drudgery.

They are all stamped with a sort of pathetic imprint; love is their element, their strength, their medium. They listen with love and understand through love. Love gives them this serious, fixed attentiveness.

The woman with the burning insignia of her stove on her fiery cheeks has lost all traces of worry except for the scolding expression of the mother whom you imagine with a horde of children jumping round her like little rabbits. And the thin girl with the dusky gaze—we've all seen her kneeling in the shadow of a confessional mumbling her sins with her mouth glued to a wooden grating from the other side of which comes the warm breath of a man without a face—what ardor she, too, is capable of!

Instead of the voice of the speaker on the platform it is the women's outcries that I hear.

These women have been imprisoned by themselves, hampered by their own lives, and what lives! what a miserable heap of desires and troubles in the face of the immense thing which gath-

ers all beings together and makes them resemble one another, the thing unanimous and intangible that I hardly see. I don't even know its name. Before it I am like a blind man who has never seen the sun, but suddenly feels it shining on his forehead and exclaims: "There is light!" It is this *thing* that has made all these women come here tonight and bestow their childish presence, their somewhat uncouth attention, their tragic lips which would kiss everything. Do they feel the great current rising from them which seeks to be caught and held fast, a current altogether new in the human atmosphere? . . . Not yet. Not yet.

How subdued Eva looks; her gaze seems clipped short; she's frowning. Her expression makes me uncomfortable.

Hands flutter like white leaves; a bow from the platform; the meeting is over.

The auditors stretch themselves a little, then rise to the accompaniment of clattering benches, gossamer sighs, and the sound of two hundred bodies moving and coming back to themselves. A faint cackling, then a full chorus of barnyard noises mounting and spreading.

I plant myself up against the wall to let them pass and see who will cast thorny glances at my hat, dress and shoes.

"Come on," cries Eva. Her forehead is drawn in hard lines. "Come on."

Outside, the night blowing upon the parting groups of women gives their scattered voices resonance.

Eva takes my arm . . . but no, I feel like being by myself. I repel her bluntly, as you throw aside a branch you have broken. She instinctively draws her cloak around her.

"What an absurd evening! Those women!" she says.

She is right, I am sure. Every one of the women, it was easy to see, was ugly and petty, but together, multiplied and magnified, their individualities wiped out, they revealed I cannot say what unformed hope, what substance, what richness. . . . If only I could explain this to Eva!

"Hurry, hurry, here comes my street-car! Good night!"

The buzzing of an electric bell, an intense disk of light, another buzzing, and the little illuminated house stops. With a flutter of her skirts and a wave of her hand, Eva disappears.

Has she really gone? Goodness, what is she carrying away with her? . . .

In the nebulous depth of the long avenue I can still distinguish a vanishing star gliding along its mechanical path.

I had said: "Here is my friend, my companion, my sister." On this evening, tender as dawn, she has left behind in me a great emotion which she does not understand.

## VII

"A lady," the fat concierge told me. "Been here twice. Well, a sort of lady, a . . . you understand. Her cheeks—her skirt—you can see her legs up to here. . . . Believe me or don't believe me, but she's twin pea to your Marie. If she comes back, what shall I tell her? I won't let that sort into my house! Eh? Kick her out?"

"Oh but, M. Etienne, I am at home today. Let her come up."

I closed my door blushing.

Through the banisters I recognized her. Actually Marie!

"Come in. . . ."

She went in ahead of me to the dining-room—"my dining-room," she used to call it—and seated herself deliberately. Genuine timidity hides itself behind a mask of absurd audacity.

"Marie . . . Marie . . . is it possible?"

She was wearing a large red straw hat turned up at one side and weighted down on the other side by a nodding mass of huge black plumes, two tall elastic antennae, the sort worn by horses drawing hearses. Under the chalky enamel you couldn't see her freckles, but her eyes, her lovely eyes of purest aquamarine, with glints of indigo from her blackened lashes, still retained their dewy look of astonishment.

Here was Marie. At last I was going to know

why she was so mute and why she ran away one evening without taking along her bundle of clothes or her prayer-book. I was going to find out how a poor little servant girl rebelling against kindness could become a poor little swaggering overdressed prostitute.

"I have come for my things."

"They are still here, Marie; I'll go and get them."

But I couldn't budge. This phenomenon coming so close to me was appalling. I looked at her. She had the soft, awkward charm of a little astonished beast. Seated there in my presence she made an ingenuous, piteous sight, like a ladybird you're afraid of crushing, or a wilful timid lamb withdrawing from your caress.

I noticed all sorts of minutiae—that she carried a cloth hand-bag, an exact copy of a bag of mine, and tied her shoe-latchets the very same way I did mine; was very neat, her shoes polished, her hands clean, her neck fairly waxed with soap. Her gaze, once aimless and imprisoned, harpooned the things in my room and withdrew freighted with discoveries. . . . And she gave me acid, persistent looks like the looks one woman gives another. "Has she aged?" her looks questioned, "has she changed, is she prettier?" Her eyes roved around the room. "Ah, that little étagère was not there in my time, nor that engraving. . . . Who's doing her work? The place looks well kept." She parted the collar of her jacket at the opening to show off her imitation brooch. The

child had become feminized, she seemed older than ever.

"Why, Marie? Why?"

I couldn't restrain myself any longer. She leaned her elbow on the table. When she raised her eyes, they were underlined with red and two slow tears cut little pathways down the powder on her cheeks. I jumped up and took her hands.

"I didn't like—I didn't know what to do with myself. It wasn't my fault. No one cared about me. . . ."

The great answer to the riddle. They all have this devouring need. What they ask of love and look for in love is "someone to care about them."

"And then my hair, my Breton dress . . . everybody stared at me. 'Aren't you ashamed?' I used to think."

Another need—to be like other people, to be just as good as anyone else—why not?—to have a bag like madam and hats like the hats you see on the street. . . .

"That's all," she added.

It was all. When women sell themselves, it is not poverty necessarily that drives them to it. You don't know the hell of jealousy that burns in all of us. There are some women who make themselves beautiful less for the sake of pleasing men than for annoying other women.

"You must be unhappy."

"Yes, ma'am."

Is a poor little thing like Marie sensual? Women are rarely sensual. If they are, they have not been so from the start; they have become so.

Her Breton accent came back. "Madam," she said in her singsong of four years ago and in the same servile tone. Now she felt like relieving herself and telling me everything. There was one man who really didn't disgust her, but he was at the front, and if only he could come back! In the meantime she practiced economies and perhaps they could fix up a home and perhaps he would marry her. But if he did not come back, then—"

I had been to blame, I alone. I had been satisfied to deplore her grim silence and do nothing. But I ought to have humiliated myself so as to earn her smile. I ought by talking to her to have driven out of her heart the longing to equal and surpass which prevents us all from being human sisters. I should have. . . .

We are all to blame for the prostitutes, we are the ones at whom the stones should be cast. Nearly all of them are little Maries with the craving for just one man, the peaceful healthy desire for a secure hearth, but we tolerate poverty, and we don't know how to talk to each other.

She put her package under her arm. I did not know what to do. I went up to her, humble of heart, and rather awkwardly kissed her cheek streaked by tears and sullied by paint.

She started, shaken by a revulsion. The liquid blue of her eyes turned sharp and aggressive, her lips narrowed; she held her little bag close like booty. Then she departed, leaving the door open

for the smoky darkness of the landing to creep into my rooms. She had the untamable, sullen expression of a hunted beast.

## VIII

Twenty days passed without news.

When I woke up, the early sunlight had a reassuring effect, the morning chattered familiarly, my terror of the night before took wings like a fancy. Hope swelled within me.

The postman's ring, sharp, strident, unbearable, reopened the wound. I rushed to the door. Nothing. A circular, an ordinary letter which I didn't have the will to open.

It was exactly twenty-two days. I forced myself to sit down at the table, but my courage was completely gone, and the alarms of the night which haunted the room gripped me by the throat. Well, there would be something tomorrow. It was impossible. . . .

Anxiety, from the moment it began, made me neglect myself—no prinking, no housework, dust powdering my furniture. The most I did was to turn back my bedclothes. What did all these things matter? I wanted to sleep, sleep. . . .

Coming back from work I slipped into my flannel dressing gown and slippers and let down my hair. I did not even take the time to warm up my dinner prepared beforehand in the morning. The

plate was on the table, an orange, a piece of bread. . . . I'd eat.

I couldn't. The mouthfuls choked me. I couldn't do one thing. I was overwhelmed, almost paralyzed, by an unconquerable weakness. I threw myself in my armchair. I would put the room in order the next day. I would work twice as hard, but not tonight. . . .

Sleep. . . .

Torpor gained complete possession of me. The darkness gathered, and when the last streak of twilight came through the window fluttering on my eyelids, a little hope returned.

After all, twenty-two days was not so terrible. Many people had had to wait longer. Hadn't I had to wait sixteen days once? Letters get lost on the way.

I visualized a scene—a hospital ward, a row of beds, white coverings, nurses. How was it I had not thought of it before? Wounded! . . . A slight wound which kept him from writing. . . . I welcomed the certainty. It was so comforting that I tried to hold on to it by jumping right up and shaking off anxiety and being happy. Anxiety is an insult to love.

I groped for the lamp, turned on the light, and laid some reading matter on the table. The disorder was dismal but—tomorrow was another day. I sat down to read.

The lines leapt at my eyes. You'd have thought them an army of ants running over the page, running, yet always remaining at the same place.

Should I try to work? Should I try to make up a package for him? That would be two packages this week, but two are not a whole lot.

My heart gave a great leap. The door-bell rang. Who could it be at this hour? My very life went round in a whirlwind, I flew to the door.

Some one in black shrinking in the dark doorway in the humble attitude of a sister of charity requesting alms for the poor. My aunt Finot!

I murmured a few little hypocrisies and put up my hair. I was fuming inwardly, although actually a little relieved at the prospect of a visit, which even if tedious would mean a human presence, a tangible certainty. I was so upset I came near saying "Tante Finot" and giving away the nickname by which she had been called in the family for twenty years.

"Come in, aunt. . . ."

She stepped in ahead of me, hunching up her body. The disorder struck me . . . my home was usually so neat . . . and my dressing gown . . . my run-down slippers—

"An awkward hour for a visit, I know," said Aunt Finot, sitting down. "Are you feeling quite well, dear?"

"Dear" in that mouth with lips like two tight-drawn catguts! It stabbed like a dagger. . . . She sat perched on the edge of the chair twisting the straps of her hand-bag. The lamplight threw dusky shadows on her skeleton frame and turned her eyes into the sharp-gleaming eyes of an executioner. My God!

"Has anything happened," I asked, "anything dreadful?"

"You see, dear . . . don't get excited . . . listen. . . ."

"Dead!"

An abyss yawned at my feet, something flashed and grazed my eyelids. I . . .

My aunt rose slowly. I saw her hands on the table knotted like a tangle of cords.

"Don't get excited. Your family received bad news, I don't know from what source. I asked them if it was official. They were all half crazy—afraid to come and tell you. . . . I always felt an affection for you, you know. . . ."

"Yes, yes, I understand; he's dead."

There she still stood, her knotted hands on the table, a grin widening her flat features. There she still stood.

"Aunt, please leave me alone, please do."

Perhaps she went on talking a little, perhaps she leaned over to kiss me, perhaps I heard words falling from her lips like pellets of lead: "country—trial—sacrifice." The door closed upon my slaughtered love.

I know I tried to stand up—it was like trying to lift a tombstone—and drag myself to the window to lean my forehead on the pane; but something pulled at me from deep within, something cold and incomprehensible, like a slimy slug, like a deep gash in living flesh. And a strange dizziness, not entirely physical, threw me back into the armchair.

The walls of this black hissing pit into which I fell were the walls of my dining-room, the very same walls papered in a scallop design, and I saw a cloud of tiny coal-black butterflies, mere specks, whirl without end from the blackened lamp-chimney.

My being turned into something enormous and gaping, which fed constantly upon a great wound. I was so overwhelmed with a senseless horror that at moments during the night his death seemed quite normal and natural. But when I withdrew my hand from under my head a multitude of serpents wriggled about within me, and I felt suffocated again and began to tumble through emptiness, while little pointed teeth bit my blood and left behind a penetrating icy poison.

It has ever been the same, Lord God. Suffering is too monotonous. . . . When a bit of sense and ordinary life returned and cried in my ears: "It is over. Never more," I felt that suffering is too monotonous; and when a clamor of revolt sounded in my being: "They have killed him!" I felt that suffering is too monotonous.

And when the dawn came tapping at the window and creeping toward the table, drab and livid, when I rose from my bruised knees, and when the humming and buzzing began in the indifferent house, I still felt that suffering is too monotonous.

## IX

Your beloved is dead.

News that comes from the depths of the ages or the depths of the flesh; you can't tell.

One day—there—a clap of thunder. It bursts from your flesh and tries to enter your flesh again. It beats at the portals of your heart, besieges your ears, howls round your entrails, but there is no place for it, no part of your body wants it, your soul retreats to shelter, your heart drips black blood, your mind goes round and round. News, News! Your beloved is dead!

No need for the thunder to break. I knew it was brewing in me.

When we used to come back from work and I kissed him with this very mouth and embraced him with these very arms, pressing him so hard that he laughed sometimes, it was premonition of the News that kept my lips sealed to his cheek so long, and turned my arms into iron clutches, and gave me warning when I woke up, and frightened me in the dark.

We used to talk about it and try to imagine what separation by death would be like. "If I die, if you die." We wanted to provide against it, we had accepted it.

My beloved, the knowledge of misfortune is not the misfortune itself; the knowledge of death is not death itself. When we were together we never imagined I should suffer so much. When people

are together, they can't imagine what it is to be alone.

It is like childbirth over again, I assure you: I remember your face when I shrieked in travail. I am more torn now, and you are not here to hold my hands.

Why do they all say suffering is necessary and ennobling? I can testify that suffering doesn't do any good.

I used to be a gay, active woman, who went about with chest expanded, a body full of pleasure, lips like kisses, and cheeks alive with color. I used to get up at five o'clock in the morning and stay up until late at night. After the day's work in the evening I'd say "tomorrow" as if anticipating the loveliest day in the world. I had poverty, laughter, an appetite, I had a perfect union with another, and I maintain that this counts. I led a life according to my own will; I had a bright child. I had all this, I *was* all this, this was my lot. . . .

To-day I am a woman whose eyes are swollen and corroded with salt tears, whose features are sharpened, whose shoulders stoop, whose black dress bags on her reduced figure, whose eyes are turned inward, whose house is untidy and whose evenings drop into darkness without the lamplight. My little one has to call me. . . . I love him without a smile, and as for myself, I hate myself.

I used to try to be kind and make it pleasant for people in my home. I am like a thistle with-

ered on its stem, I am like a fruit cut open and thrown out on the street. I am useless and bitter —I am bad.

When people come to me, I feel the pricking of their thorns, and I wallow in gall. They are all enveloped in an awful respect for death. It revolts me.

My family comes to visit me, each one of them chockful of advice and dropping honied words. . . . Yet I was more worthwhile when I was happy. Why didn't they incline themselves when there was still time? They seem to send up a cry of relief. "At last! You're suffering! At last a person can approach you!" They console me and lull me; they are crows quarreling over the remains of a charnel-house.

But when they have the effrontery to extol his virtues, it is too much; my grief springs to the attack. The idea! They hated him while he lived! Keep quiet, don't insult him! I wish to be alone with the knowledge that he is dead.

But I don't utter a word; grief has lips of stone; I keep my secret locked within me while seeming to listen to them. I sit in front of the fire, my hair loose, my forehead drawn, watching the flames blaze and the embers fall. After all, their presence, their footsteps pawing the silence, mean only a little additional pain. Time passes, and they're sure to go eventually.

Has the door closed on them? I don't know. I can hardly move.

I am alone with you, my knees clasped in my

hands, while the castle in the fire slowly crumbles on its gray dust.

Some mourners at least have the consolation of mourning real dead—real dead whom they have seen stiffen into death, whose last words they have received, whose last agonies they have tried to soothe, for whom they have done everything they could.

But you, beloved, are you dead? I don't even know. "Fallen on the field of honor?" What does that mean? Was it in the evening or the morning? Were you alone? Did you cry out? Did you suffer terribly? Did you open your eyes once more? Perhaps you couldn't, perhaps you called and called for me? Perhaps you thought I should have come? Ah yes, I should have been there; it is my fault. I have always cured you, you know I have. I simply had to hold your head in my hands and your pain was eased.

But I didn't die—I didn't die at the moment of your death, that moment too frightful to speak of. I didn't die when life was drowned in your mouth. We knew the whole truth concerning each other, yet when you were dying I may have been smiling.

For fifteen nights, fifteen days, fifteen years my heart has been crying that you are dead and that it has lost the hope of ever seeing you again in your clothes exactly as you used to look, with that manner of yours. . . . Fifteen days since I have been trying to learn again, begin all over again, and call everything into question again. Fifteen days of impotence. I see only what is.

There is earth on your hands, on your eyes, on every part of your body wherever it may be. Your feet are cold and gray like the feet of a pauper, your skin is bloated, worms are preying upon you. I don't want to—I cannot see you as you are. When I think of you I have a false vision of your living self with your cheeks of the color of life and your dear natural gestures. How can I help being all bewildered? Nothing is left. Even the memory of you changes from day to day. I can no longer recall the right tone of your voice. Your corpse is hidden. It is as if I were suffering for no reason at all.

Not to know how to suffer, perhaps that is what suffering is. . . . Not to divine where you are, is that your death?

The sparkling hearth-fire has scattered and gone out. Fire has devoured fire. A few embers reddening here and there, a porous heap of fanciful firebrands.

And now, and now, my beloved, if I no longer see you, I do see the consuming truth. I see it and here it is: I let you go. I consented. There's no doubt of it, it was *I* who killed you. . . .

## X

I felt a great need for fresh air and light. What the nature of this hunger and thirst was I cannot tell. . . . The sunshine suddenly lighted up the window-frame. Its golden rays coming

through the open casement and falling obliquely upon the objects in my room filled it with numerous fires. It was a salute.

To be out of doors, to walk, to feel the sun on my skin!

I had a letter to mail. The thought of it brought me to my feet, impatient, ready.

Should I take the little one along? But how about a good long walk, the semblance of distraction? . . . I decided to go alone.

With my eyes close to the image in the mirror, I powdered my face and puffed my hair on each side under my hat as I used to do. How the least prinking helps a woman! Instead of the really ugly pointed little face smeared with pallor, which, without arousing my shame, had visibly lengthened these past weeks, there was a face of warm, even whiteness and of an oval not so pronounced, eyes which, even if dark-rimmed, had lost their fixity, and a shower of red tendrils like coppery breaths blown on my forehead.

The early spring was making itself felt. A raw wind was raising the dust of the streets. Assailed at the first step by the blue, dancing, swirling air, I walked falteringly, like a prisoner who has just been released and doesn't know where to turn.

Everything the same. The old bridge still stretching its badly joined planks from the paved street to the road where the wistaria bloomed. The patched, mossy roof of the old wash-house a few steps from the mill still displaying its dog's-eared edges. The same vistas across the green breaches between the houses.

Every corner of the town held out a memory to me—here a two-year-old memory, here a distinct vision crouching. I called to the vision and welcomed it. My life was not dead, and my heart was open and there was still a man to love me. . . .

I had been unjust in the black moment of despair. My share of love and light still remained. Did he know I was a widow? Since he had been taken prisoner six months ago, no news had reached me and I didn't know if he had received any of my letters.

The broad sunshine expanded my chest and warmed up a vision so tender—a hope or a memory—that I was stung by a pang of remorse and almost felt like chasing it away.

I reached the center of the town, where there were more people and especially more well-to-do people.

Feminine figures, which I recognized, came toward me at a dull gait. I knew them; I had seen these old ladies at prayers two years before. They wore the same dresses and the same hats, the sort you don't see anywhere except in the provinces. . . . Hypocritical hands as I passed the houses, lifted the crocheted curtains. I was preceded by mystery and followed by whisperings.

Every passerby seemed to be blaming me for the dazzling sunlight which my eyes were embracing; every house scowled, and the whole street, in spite of the pleasant weather, wore veritable mourning, not mere sadness and solemnity, but mourning,

and the people looked as though they were in a slow funeral procession, the women strangled in black, upholstered in crepe, and buried alive in their hoods and veils.

The Cathedral square was resplendent with profane joy. The birds swooped from one to the other of the great, white-dappled plane-trees, and every now and then one perched on the statue in the fountain, a clumsy girl with petticoat of stone and turned-up sleeves, a decent bosom bared, a sheaf in one arm, and an eternally dried-up urn in the other arm. Through its high lanceolate windows and the tracery of the two rose-windows Notre Dame was drinking in light and making mock of its ancient front.

It was a brilliant day, and the world rejoiced. I tasted the savor of living. In spite of myself I fell into the nervous, elastic step of old and drank in the living air like an intoxicating elixir.

An idea took lodgment—he was familiar with this scene, these crabbed shops, hostile promenaders, and square of bourgeoning; he had walked on these cobblestones; and at the edge of the town was his little summer villa. The idea went round and round, very fast; and I was weak; so I clutched at it for support.

Another veiled woman in black. . . .

That figure tending to heaviness but graceful and in the very mould of femininity is not unfamiliar. I have seen the woman before. You can

tell from a distance that she wears the mark of the widow, a hood-like hat faced with white.

She too; . . .

I am interested in her. In the country you are interested in everybody you meet.

Who is she, I wonder. She seems to be about forty, but neither her hair nor her cheeks have lost their freshness. Who. . . .

My heart bursts, alarm comes rushing, misfortune approaches. . . . She walks toward me —she is only a few feet away. . . . If she would only stop . . . it is she . . . his wife!

In the time it takes to walk only a few feet you can undergo the acutest agony. I held my breath and for a second time felt death strike me with its thunderbolt. I had time to become a widow too.

She advanced terribly: it was death advancing along the sidewalk. I felt I must detain and implore her. With jaws set I restrained a great convulsive outcry and flung myself in her way. . . . My lips gave a sort of cluck. . . . She fixed her eyes straight ahead and turned away deliberately as if from a drunken beggar.

I looked and looked after her. . . .

She departs—forever—her skirt grazing the ground. Her veil carries away the remnant of my joy, leaving me there stupefied and convulsed, alone under the sun. She departs. . . .

My God! . . . .

## XI

My son is growing up.

He has reddish-brown ringlets, his cheeks are vermilion, the blue of his eyes radiates seraphic calm. He is probably going to be very handsome. Often people stop me on the street to tell me how lovely he is, and for a moment I feel some pride.

He is beginning to show human traits; he talks, he expresses a desire to touch and possess things, and likes to listen to stories, which used to make no appeal: "And then, Mamma? Tell me, what next? . . . " I always begin by kissing him.

My heart has grown with him. I have just begun to feel that his existence is rooted in my own existence. What welds me to him are not only the pains I take for him, or my perpetual anxiety. I am welded to him by the kisses he already gives me. When he says "Mamma" in his inimitable way, I am proud and overwhelmed; when he puts his arms round my neck, it is as if I were usurping a reward too perfect for me.

The terror with which he filled me when he was so little and frail is disappearing. I have rocked him, watched over him and suckled him; he has strong legs and a strong body; nevertheless a much greater terror is growing in me.

The greatest terror of my like. To bring up a child, to hold in your hands not only what he will be, but what he may be; and to decree everything, the colors he looks at, the words he hears! To

give birth a second time to a living creature. To be worthy of it. . . .

And to have nothing to help you but a heart wise yet too intellectual, the heart of an adult.

To have this timid heart, the maternal heart, too prompt and misleading.

Not to have anything else!

## XII

I was sitting on the grass beside the rugged, windswept path which follows the curve of the sea. Instinctively I straightened up out of my careless attitude into the attitude of a woman in danger.

He is coming closer, he is very near. . . .

He forces himself to assume the indifferent, I don't-know-you air of some one happening to be passing by, but he shortens his strides, and in spite of himself his face dilates and beams with the delight of the hunter striking the trail. A little more, and he'd let out a whistle.

Should I try to escape through the woods by cutting across the railroad track? Should I? . . .

"How do you do?"

"How do you do?"

The man is handsome, decidedly handsome, even in the full light, and I smile at his coming as I smiled a few moments ago when the sun climbed over the slope.

I had always seen him in the dusk when he re-

turned to his smart white house held fast in a coil of green. He would stop a moment at the rusty gate and give me a lingering glance out of his long-lashed eyes. Yesterday evening when we passed each other on the road, his eyes were like black enamel, but now in the bare light of the morning they are of a more crystalline gray than the sea.

A tragic duel of looks. . . . a thousand questions asked and answered . . . wonderful understanding . . . dizziness . . . unbearable dizziness.

He stands balancing himself on his feet searching the ground for the nascent lie. Then he puts a direct, confident question—is this magnificent weather going to last? I in my turn dissemble and scrutinize the silent, motionless horizon.

Safe! Hypocrisy between us. He has found a suitable topic and exploits it cleverly in jerky little phrases, rather sensual, like the kisses you give a child. He points his three-cornered head at me and tosses back his thick black mane.

He shuffles his feet. "Answer me," beg the glittering eyes. "Answer me. . . . I am asking you a question. . . ."

No, I don't want to answer. A word thrown out now and then with the fervent assurance one always has under a desirous gaze; also the defensive attitude men force upon you. I lean over and begin to pluck the rich grass methodically, producing a fine, fresh scent and the dry, peaceful sound of a browsing beast. Two bare spots in

the velvety slope and several light blades zigzagging in the wind. . . .

Will he go?

He understands. His chest collapses like a pair of bellows and he draws his two long legs together ostentatiously.

Why this tricky manœuvring? Why thoughts unspoken? I am a part of the tender landscape to him, and I realize he is looking at me tenderly. Why not dare to make a pure, natural confession?

"Good-bye?"

"Good-bye."

I can't be irritated with this man; I haven't the courage to; the weather is too lovely.

When you see the jolly morning frolicking on the road in cap-and-bells and look over where the blue curve of paradise lovingly touches the brown curve of the earth, all you feel is a warm indulgence.

It is too beautiful. The trees mingle their branches, the rays of sunshine mingle their warmth, the birds mingle their songs. Down below, the tide is coming in with the rush of clanking chains submerged by a host of swift, frisky little waves. . . .

And this man with the knavish eyes is nothing more than a black particle blown by the wind to the end of this promontory where a few clustered pines taper into the azure.

It is too beautiful. All you can do is close your eyes.

I close them—to shut out for a while the dazzle

of the water in the indigo basin, the thousand golden bubbles in its centre, the thousand silver teeth biting at its edge. I don't want to think any more. All I want to feel are the warm darts which pierce my hands resting on the grass and the peculiar sense of well-being which takes the place of everything else. . . .

Have I really slept? . . . Sweetness, the sweetness of lips kissed by breezes, a sweetness complete and overwhelming . . . a delicious life.

But . . . this black gown . . . my dead . . . I have nothing but my grief, nothing but my grief. What wrong have I perpetrated that my grief should forever sing in my ears?

Ah, just to forget . . . Everywhere the earth breathing happiness, the blue, blue rolling waves, the almond trees veiled in faery whiteness, everywhere the nuptials of joy.

Grief, where are you? Everywhere space terribly alive, with hope in every color and death just died for the last time.

## XIII

It happened as it does in novels. The man suddenly feels the beast of prey panting within him and yields to it hotly; the woman writhes under the fiery coercion and gropingly reassumes the ancient ways that have come down from time immemorial. . . .

Even to the words I used. Where did they come from, the words that cut him like a lash, whipped up his desire, and then fell on his face like drops of ice water?

I was ashamed. I straightened my hair and left the room. How was it nothing warned me that I must be on my guard against the man alongside of whom I had been working daily? Had I been blind? I tried to extract something significant from my recollections . . . but no . . .

I am going to leave him soon, and I must speak to him.

His disappointment gives him a humanizing air of meekness. It inclines me to him. You feel intensely that other doors are open and, if you wanted to, you could knock and gain admittance.

This grim laconic man, whose ways are confined to the ways of command, who has been sterilized and handcuffed by the barren power which money confers, looks at me intently with eyes raised like a child's. Women are wrong in supposing that a man forsakes them when he renounces his desire.

I speak to him disconnectedly, but I am leading up to what I want to say. And he moves his face a little forward and still a little further forward; it's as though he were drawing closer, step by step, step by step. And everything external about me is effaced by degrees, my sunshiny hair, my mouth, my body present but concealed, my entire femininity. An infallible instinct tells me this. He takes in my voice alone, and is surprised

that my voice talks nothing but sense. But he is going to know if it will talk sense straight to the end, so he settles himself more comfortably in his armchair, lets his eyebrows relax, and loses all thought of himself. His logic is being appealed to.

"Now as to your money . . . you know if I married you it would not be for your love. . . Your money? . . . It doesn't count? You're right, it doesn't count . . . I might not have discovered it at once. I might have said, as I did the other day, that I don't love you. I might also have thought of my aversion to the idea of marriage. Don't look like that. Marriage as it is to-day is immoral and stupid. Don't say my marriage was perfect. The man I lost was a rare soul. For ordinary people like you and me marriage brings nothing but misfortune and mediocrity.

"To marry is to lie, to deceive both yourself and the other one; and when a man and a woman harbor infinite hopes, when they look out upon perpetually changing horizons, when they have the choice of all the roads in the world, and the whole of life spreads out before them, it is absurd to suppose that they can ever subject themselves to each other.

"You marry, you pledge your soul, you promise your flesh. Once imprisoned, you maim yourself, and should the call of love some day become too strong, what other alternative than to lie or break the chains? Deceit or catastrophe; there

is no choice. Love does not reconcile the primitive hatred between man and woman: on the contrary, it sharpens it; and for two people to venture upon the impossible enterprise of joining together two opposite destinies the full length of their courses, requires a spirit that neither you nor I possess, a spirit greater than nature bestows; it also takes the intellect of a God. I assure you it does. . . .

"Perhaps you would have waited till the very end to bring out your trump argument. But I would have rejected your seductive words angrily. They would not be to the point. The point is, that if I were to become your wife, my lot would be as I have described it.

"You lean forward, you approve what I say.

"The simple fact is, I couldn't live. There would be no use my trying. I should not have the strength every day to witness a real death unless I had the tiredness and the sort of forgiveness that come from hard work. I simply couldn't eat with appetite, I couldn't sleep in peace.

"And in the morning, if I did not know that this exultation, this unruly vigor, this swarming of scattered inclinations could not be controlled, dammed and curbed by laws . . . no, I would not dare to begin to live again. . . .

"In a single day there are too many temptations, in a single body too many feelings; the inner life, remote and *secondary,* must learn through humble duty to subdue itself by merely keeping its attention fastened upon the external life. If we listened to the goodness, the heaven

we all carry round within us, what would become of us? I for my part would not be capable of resisting long . . . I believe you understand me. You yourself have felt what a help and support your daily routine is. I never paid much attention to you, you were only one of the many supernumeraries on the stage of my work, but I respected you because you made a part of my efforts, and you too took great pains with your work.

"Every time I left you, I felt gentler. Though fatigued I felt free to think of myself, buoyant, wiser, unloaded, as if my sins had been forgiven me . . . I had paid my debt; I owed nothing.

"I do not know if work in itself is a good deed. God probably never meant it for us. Not to lie does not mean to discern the truth, and to work is not to find the truth, but it is to have the right to advance toward truth and put oneself in a state of grace and health.

"Then remember that you dared to offer me this miserable fate, me who in doing the same work lived beside you as if under the same roof, who felt imbued with an austere ardor. But you saw nothing, learned nothing, understood nothing. You horrified me. What you did yesterday! Good heavens! You attacked, I defended; we are quits.

"And the money spread out glitteringly to gag me at night . . .

"You must be just. While you were going through your day's work it never occurred to you that I had my day's work too, and my strong arms

and the energy and chastity deep-seated in my body . . . What was the value, the slight importance I possess as a person to you? What was my peace to you?

"Even if you make fun of the exigencies of the soul, do you think it's a question of the soul alone? And how about one's relation to other people? You go out of your house on to the street, you see the crowds on their way to shops, offices and factories. You have to look the working-people in the face . . . Tell me, how do the men and women who have *nothing to do* look the workers in the face?

"I see this doesn't touch you. You are withdrawing. To keep you leaning toward me, I myself and I alone have to be the subject under discussion. I must be uncovered, laid naked, by what I say. . . ."

I felt a sudden surge of blood to my cheeks and my lips; our looks crossed like swords.

Here I am with nothing more to do, my arms hanging at my sides, the sudden weight of my useless words on my shoulders. The man follows my example and rises.

"I shall go away, very far away. Don't mind. That's the good of being a woman who works; you're not afraid. You may be at the mercy of misfortune, which is always lurking, but not at the mercy of human beings. . . .

"That's all, I'll go now. . . ."

In the silence that cuts in I feel how this man is

wishing I'd never go—wishing it so strongly that for a moment he touches love and a path is opened along which I could take a step, but only a single step, no more.

My eyes stare into space. I hear the mournful, eternal good-bye you say to things—this table at which I worked, the afternoon sunlight laughing through the window, all the familiar objects, which reel slightly from the separation now beginning, from the nascence of everything that is to be. . . .

He presses my hand. And I think of all the men you could convince if you wanted to take the trouble. . . .

If you had the time. . . .

If life were not a choice.

## XIV

Her head is nodding and dropping lower and lower, her fingers are gently loosening their hold on the square of embroidery: my mother has gone to sleep.

She comes to see me frequently now, and always arrives panting, loaded down with luscious fruit or bottles of golden wine "from your father." When she prolongs her stay after dinner too late to return home that night, I give my room up to her. You can tell—poor mother—that her visits are undertaken for duty's sake—pilgrimages on which she never fares forth without a preliminary

struggle: "That child—you can't leave her all alone—you've got to be sorry for her."

When I opened the door for her this evening, I could see there was something on her mind. Her face was drawn, and contrary to her wont she kissed me two or three times. Was there going to be a battle?

Dinner was over, but I still waited.

"Oh, by the way, my dear, this idea of yours—your plan to go away—it isn't serious, is it? How about your position? Are you really going to carry things to such extremes? Your obstinacy is very annoying. What whimsies you used to have when you were a young girl, that faddy notion about earning your own living . . . and marrying against our will—yes, against our will. . . . Your poor husband is dead; so you've paid, and your father and I are willing to let bygones be bygones. If you come and live with us, you know you'll lead a nice quiet life and have everything you need. Your room will be kept in order for you, I will help you bring up the boy, you will be able to go out as much as you want to. We will give you perfect freedom. . . . And you mustn't forget you still have a future, you're young. . . . Why don't you say something? Am I an enemy? Am I not considering your good?"

My mother floundered for more arguments. So to avoid idle discussion I threw my arms around her neck.

She smiled a good full smile, thinking the battle was won and everything was settled without much

difficulty. . . . Now that she was satisfied, her best arguments came crowding: she had known from the start that I would agree with her.

"You haven't only just yourself to consider, you see. When a woman has a child, she doesn't do any and everything she feels like doing."

Now I had to explain!

"Mamma, dear. . . ."

I was biting my lips and probably wore the same obstinate look I did as a little girl, because she pushed me away and her eyes flashed.

"And what about us? In what sort of a position do you think it places us? . . . Think a little. People will see you suddenly running away as if we had refused to take you in. What do you think we'll be taken for? And you, my goodness! How will it look for a young woman to go away all by herself, on an adventure?"

Her face was purple, her voice came out in a rush, her arms extended beyond her shadow. She was quite beside herself.

I don't know what made me do it, whether my worn nerves or my terror at always, no matter what I did, seeing a gulf yawn between us—I burst into tears.

With her stubborn patience my mother often went to extremes, but she could not resist the argument of tears. She was taken aback. I had conquered. She put her arms round me in a large, warm, cradling embrace, planted short little kisses all over my hair, comforted me in my distress. "Come, dear, don't cry, don't cry."

I made a tremendous effort to shake off a frightful impression. If I had had to pay with my life to get rid of it, I would have paid with my life. But drop by drop the poison filtered into my heart and changed it into a bitter heart which seemed unlike my own.

With all the appearance of humility in her drooping shoulders and bowed head, armed with the tricky sweetness of a person accustomed to yielding, my mother drew our chairs closer together and tried to console me at any price by talking of something else. She held out her needlework.

"A tray-cover. I noticed you haven't got one. . . . Rows of hemstitching with a square of filet in the centre. Do you like it?"

I dabbed my eyes, forced a smile, and leaned over to watch her draw the threads. "Wonderful," I said, "marvellously fine, and such tedious work." I forced myself to fill up the gaps in the conversation.

The evening flagged slowly and gently. The oil in the lamp was giving out. A drowse gradually laid itself upon the delicate maternal face; under the scant light beginning to smell of smoke, it looked almost like a mummy's.

She is asleep now.

My imagination is free; the frightful impression carries me far back to a time shrouded in dimness which resembles my childhood days.

A mere baby still. At night caressing hands tucked me in bed. I held up my forehead for the kisses of a fairy. . . .

A little girl who ran and fell and hurt her forehead and palms and flew with her troubles to the living Providence. "Did you hurt yourself? . . . Ah, you're bleeding!" I felt the thrill of the miraculous wound because she caught me in her arms and pressed my undeserved suffering to her heart. Then she tended me, oh, so gently. When she finished, I secretly regretted that the hurt was assuaged and I had no more blood to offer, red flowing blood, in exchange for the doting tenderness that it brought raining down upon me.

A long illness. A veritable angel hovering all the time. Clouds in my room, clouds on my bed, and a constant buzzing in my ears. When the angel moved, a current of freshness reached me, a magnificent hand raised the head which weighed like a ball of fire, and the heavenly voice said in the tone of ordinary mothers: "Drink, darling!"

When my memory brings me up to the moments of effort, the real moments which count, I find myself an orphan.

No, you were not there, mother, when my inner life developed, nor the first morning when I saw clearly, nor when my love came. You were never with me at any time when my good will acted, never, never. It was you who stayed behind and left me. I went on my way. Should I have stopped to stay behind with you?

You idolized my littleness, my tears, my naughtinesses. You covered them all up, I know. But one can't keep on being ill, or naughty, or a little tot.

You are the mother, you pardon everything. When father scolded us, you came with a kiss to absolve us in secret, and sometimes, gritting your teeth and darting the defiance of a she-wolf from your eyes, you'd say: "I would forgive you all your faults. I would say you are right when you are wrong."

But see here, mother, this is what I have done: will you forgive me this:

I have invoked the truth, I have taken pains, I have climbed up, I have striven, I have had radiant moments, days of flowering, and happiness was the same age as myself. Mother, have you forgiven me this?

I am not better-hearted than you, but it is the life about me which demands that one do more, love more. This is what differentiates and actually divides us.

Everything that sings and invites one out into the good old world, the "out-of-doors," seems pernicious to you. What you would have wanted was to stand barring the door with your arms crossed and refuse me the fresh air. You yourself avaricious but destitute would have liked me to salute your avarice and praise your destitution. "Will you set yourself up in judgment over your father and mother?"

Mother, when children grow up, their eyes open.

. . . And if my son sees me fallen lower than his love, lower than my own love, let him accuse and condemn me.

No, it will not always be the same thing, as you say, for that depends neither upon him nor you, but only upon me. You do not know, you do not know!

With its expiring breath the lamp sends out a blackish, leaping light, which splashes shadows on the pendulous surroundings.

I had never noticed the puffiness of her lids, nor the sharpness of her cheekbones, nor the drooping corners of her tender mouth, nor the flatness and thinness of her hair, which used to be full and flaming as my own. Never before had I remarked the tragic similarity between the dead and the sleeping. And I did not know that immutable Truth sometimes has the ring of a curse and makes you cry, and yet is Truth.

The scissors gliding to the floor awakened her with a start. "What, still crying?"

She gave the lamp a shake to force a bit of light and said in her resigned tone, instinctively but unconsciously touching my horrible thought: "Wipe your eyes, dear . . . the dead have to be forgotten. . . ."

## XV

The storm raked the streets and stunned the houses. . . . All night long it raged; and once the thunder crashed so close by that I jumped out of bed terror-stricken to make sure the shutters were closed.

The morning dawned sullen, dragging lazy, gray wings on the earth and taking flight only at the furious onslaught of the wind.

To comb my hair I seated myself close to the window with my face to the mirror on the wall.

Outside, the downpour and incessant sharp rattle, the blue-lacquered roofs, the wan drift of the clouds. In front of me, an image which had my name.

The more eager a woman is to please, the less she sees *herself* in the mirror. What she sees is the idea others have of her, a sort of consciousness of her power, the irrepressible desire to attract.

When I sat down before the glass just now, I must have seen *myself;* suddenly I felt afraid.

I had raised the tumble of ringlets from my forehead and saw a gleam—my first white hair. Then I scanned my face closely, pitilessly. At the outer corners of my eyes a place was preparing for a fine meshwork which would close up when I laughed.

A mad need fell upon me—to see myself again and again. Around each corner of my mouth an invisible line had chosen its pathway; the perfect

oval of my face slipped slightly from its frame; under the chin there was an imperceptible mass which would never yield to any amount of massage.

I wanted to run away, I wanted to look, I wanted. . . . I tell you my heart was leaping from between my ribs, so that you could have taken it in your hand.

How many years are there left? . . . Ten years? . . . Eight years? . . . Perhaps only six in which to continue to be the very same woman I am.

A day will come immersed in the other days, similar to the other days, when this woman will be dead while I shall live.

I try to question space. I turn in every direction. The storm has increased. The rain is coming down in sheets and rebounding in mist. The polished pavements are cracked by quivering little ripples. The tempest drives the people ahead like leaves.

Whence this dread which blows like a typhoon from the future, breathing on my youth and freezing my blood? Whence these two words which gnaw at my breast like a canker? Six years. . . .

No, no, it is impossible. I believe in the deluge, in the thunder, in misfortune, in oblivion. Not in that. Why should this face of mine with its curves, its marble purity and its color change? Why? I have always had a fair amount of courage, I have always done what I had to do, but

this renunciation, this hideous acquiescence. I haven't got the courage for that, no, I haven't.

I am prepared to accept death. If necessary, I will stretch my hands out to it. Let the one moment of my life which wipes out the other moments flow into nothingness. Take, strike, I am prepared. . . .

But that "six years, no more," should be written on my face, that people should see my face and I should hold it up smilingly like a ruthless gift to those I love, that I should bear the signs upon me of dull decay, wrinkles, falling hair, withered cheeks, and dimmed eyes. . . . What if I refuse? . . .

I could no longer bear to look into the mirror and see what was going to be. I held my face to the pane on which a dismal music was drumming.

I have had deep feelings as plentiful and coming as thick and fast as these drops of rain; some feelings have been vaster than the soul itself; but the only feeling truly like woman, the only feeling essentially woman, which weds her soul while wedding her body, is the immense desire to be beautiful. I have lived through my love of others, I love my child as though I were still carrying it, yet all the time, from waking up in the morning until going to bed at night, year in and year out, from as far back as I can remember, I was cloaked and upheld by a will to please.

I was not more beautiful than other women, but I wanted to be. In spite of me and in spite

of themselves, the men hovered about me, lavish of their glances. I moved like a ray of joy, life was a festival redder than war; I expressed myself without saying a word, all hearts were ready, they gave me more love than I asked for and almost as much as I needed.

That was the air I breathed and had to breathe. Is it good, is it bad? It is an instinct which keeps turning rapidly round and round in you. If you were to pull it up, it would sprout again.

Then how can it be that some day, though I shall have done nothing to bring it on, the territory of this indestructible instinct will be clouded over and made barren forever after? How can it be that I shall no longer please if I still want to please?

The rain is beating upon the streaked windowpane and glides down against my cheeks in long transparent tears. Every chink in the room is an inlet for the wind. Around me there is a wailing as if drawn from a sad, dreary bowstring.

Is it the woman of the mirror? Is it the woman that I am? You can't tell which woman is speaking to the other woman. . . .

"So you're of the sort to let yourself be disheartened?

"You thought you had said all the good-byes there are to say in life. There is one left, even more awful than the others. You have dragged yourself over mouldering graves, yet when you arose you found something to keep you alive. But

as yet you are unworthy of this last good-bye. To survive it, you need a grandeur you don't possess, a more solid strength than the furtive power you're proud of. You believed you were pure, and you were quite sure you lived in your entirety. Look! . . ."

How ashamed I am, O God. What a stranger the woman opposite me is. . . .

At the outset I said to the husband I chose: "I shall cherish your happiness as much as I cherish my love for you; and if ever your happiness assumes the features of another woman, that woman shall be dear to me."

When another woman approached, I knitted my brows and formed a secret vow to blacken her in his eyes.

He loved me as you love your life, as you sing, as you kiss. And I reproached him for not leaning over close enough and telling me tender things over and over again every day. I had plighted my troth; in order not to take it back, I needed actions, words; to keep it, I had to put his heart to the proof.

When I came to know another love, my instinct could not rise to the height of my idea. I did not know how to bring the two men together, nor did I know how to make the woman who loved him receive the truth.

And I allowed useless people, useless existences

to come to me. I saw them fighting around me like quarrelsome, chattering sparrows around a tree; I saw them pillage and carry away in their beaks the ripe fruit of my days. To know how to live is to know how to choose. I did not know.

Everywhere shame. Everywhere in the past, the hell of what I have lost.

These hands capable of everything have done almost nothing. I contented myself with little and believed in humility.

I silenced nearly every appeal within me. I let regard for others govern and restrain me. I still feel how the imperious look of an unforgettable passerby once tore me; the rude superior deprecation in that look was like a cry rising above the night. Several indifferent persons were about me, my spirit fixed upon them. Perhaps it was the last of my life which a stranger mercilessly carried off in the depths of his being. I let him pass.

I believed myself beautiful. Beauty is a promise which no woman has ever kept. I have seen my features in the glass, but I have not looked for the mission to which I was appointed. What human being ever perceives that he wears a distinctive badge?

The wind redoubles in strength and howls in the face of the sky. The rain-spout near the window is choking, the drops rap-tap-tap on the pane: "What have you done? What have you done?"

Lord, I am looking myself in the face. While waiting for the light to appear and the clouds to scatter, for the damp air to shine between the drops of sunlight, for the good genius who must teach us to grow old, for the inaccessible perfection for which I was built, I look and look at myself. . . .

I went to the window to watch the storm and smoothe my hair. Leaning toward the mirror it was God I found.

God is there, I see Him approaching when I approach and smiling when I smile, God who carries me and whom I carry, God palpitating with faith, God who lowers His head. . . .

I believe in myself.

## XVI

I cannot sleep.

There's no good-bye to say, it is late, everything is ready, and yet I am stifling in this empty room, which lives only through my sleeping son and me.

But he sleeps. . . .

I hardly recognize him when he sleeps, and I have to go close to him. He fell asleep a moment ago and is lying exactly the way I placed him, with his arm outstretched. Is there anything tenderer and frailer to behold than this little rounded face with its fine veins and pearly curves? Beneath his sleep and the warmth of his cheeks, life is working, and what a hurry it is in!

I lean down closer, almost touching the fine down of gold on his forehead, his velvety warmth, his scarcely perceptible breath. As always, I feel both terrified and transported by this immense littleness, and consumed by a longing to put my lips to him. . . . I draw back: I must not wake him up.

I move away from the crib. The will to question the present which is passing takes a stronger hold of me this evening than usual.

No, it is not to you I turn, my child.

The best in me, the true, God, and my soul do not concern you.

Perhaps I am too hasty in saying this. Perhaps I have paid too much attention to the gulf between my generation and the old blind generation. Probably the gulf between your generation and mine is not so deep, but when I look carefully I do not find that you are the profound motive.

Nothing holds out the promise that in the future we can really give each other a single day. When I look at you, I am astonished that I gave you life —it is such a miracle to have caused a creature to live. I am at the verge of the space separating us. I do not find you there. I go my way, you go your opposite way, and though there be nothing impossible in the world, our mutual understanding is impossible. I shall never attain to your height.

You were born to contradict, since you must surpass, the palpitating question that I am, my acts, their purpose. You, whom I carried in my

womb nine months, will never be anything but a stranger in my wet eyes and to the kisses of my lips, a stranger who departs with my blood in his veins.

You have come. But I did not sink into the fatal pit that engulfs mothers, the inevitable snare. It's so hard to resist the weak little thing which can't talk. How can you be expected to resist? A woman eclipses herself for the sake of the child she brings into the world, and at the first cry, the mother is in danger. It is the mother we should try to save. There's no need to be afraid that the mother-instinct will cool off. The earth will cool off sooner!

To have children. Love is born with them, but love is not enough. And to try with all your might to fulfill your own destiny. And misfortune if the children fall behind!

Sleep, my little one. . . .

I have opened the window; the night breathes upon my face. In the wide outdoors, where the darkness is naked and the freshness is blue, the expanse opens out like a river. Below, the clustered houses—a sombre vegetation, a confused, winking mass, a starry profundity, vast and chaotic, with no boundary lines between city and sky.

My eyes look tranquilly upon the black future piled up at my feet. My eyes are no longer restless, because now I know for all time what the future holds. I know that soon I shall be tired

and go to sleep, and when I wake up in the white daylight my son will put his arms round my neck so prettily. I will smile, then the time for parting will come. The hidden days contain the unknown. . . . But forever and ever it will be suffering.

The future is not a question you ask; it is the suffering that awaits you. Suffering is the answer to every question, and every instant claws the flesh. If you listen intently, you will hear that the echo of everything is a sob.

It is suffering. Suffering does not find a vent, it does not bleed in any cry, it clings to you, and nothing reveals it because it is omnipresent, so present and so plain that you can't look for or find it. It is not the tears choking your throat, nor the groan at night, nor the knell of a parting footstep, nor the mourning which stifles you, nor the heart in your breast, for that would be too little. When suffering begins with exuberant sunshine and mornings like a flourish of trumpets, it is even more terrible because it is further away. . . . Suffering is more. It is unlike anything else. It is regular, steady as the breath, amazing, tolerable, and it is not the last word you say, it is also the first word; it follows its mortal, monotonous course, and you realize it has no name: to *live* is to suffer.

Is it human misery? No, human suffering. Stammering nights, groping footsteps. Whither and why? No, there's no time to lose, you jump up and go, go, because you haven't suffered enough yet. Look.

When I leave tomorrow with my suffering in my breast I shall go in advance of suffering. I shall not hesitate in the doorway. Looking back into the room I shall not say what I have often said: "You are a bit of myself, good-bye. Since my eyes will no longer be here to see you, give them a picture of yourself to take along."

Suffering is self-sufficient. You don't associate things with it. I shall have my back turned, my body will be impatient to lean forward. I no longer care for memories.

Not one. Not even the memory of you, my two dead lovers. Other dead are further on, where I am going, or rather, other suffering. And your suffering is over because you are dead.

The pictures I have of you rise less and less frequently in my memory. How I cherished them at first! Some especially. . . . That little station-platform where we met . . . the transparent morning flew ahead of your footsteps, the spring was intoxicated, I ran into your outstretched arms. . . . And the path where I cried, the sunset sinking away between the branches, my head grazing your shoulder like a fruit falling from the tree. . . . And another. . . . And another. . . .

It is over. I carry you differently. Some of your ways, which I acquired, stick to me from habit. My voice often has your inflection, and when I am animated I feel I have made some of your ideas my own. If I don't remember you so

clearly, it is because I *live* you and the legacy you left me rises and falls with my breathing.

In my fierce survival I have preserved only what is of use to me. All the rest has decomposed; it is nothing to me any more. We should break away from this burden of the dead. The dead are the living who have abandoned us, and sooner or later, whether we wish to or not, we forget them.

I loved my dead dearly, so dearly that it seemed to me my being inclined towards them the moment they appeared—so dearly that because of them, who have gone, love has remained.

Love proclaims its law. You must show your love, it cries.

Somewhere in the world tonight there are faces lying dormant for me, persons to whom I have things to say. I am waiting for them, I stretch my arms out to them, I know they will come because of my need for embraces, a desire for caresses, so strong tonight that I jump up with a start. It is as if half of my body were missing. I see myself deserted and frightfully widowed, and my mouth quivers with hunger and thirst for another mouth.

I know a man is on the way. I shall recognize him. I shall have the somewhat bitter audacity you must have in order to confess yourself the immense thing you are. I shall stir him, I shall do everything; you can go the full lengths of the sublime that dwells within you.

As soon as he will rise above the horizon he

will realize from my mere expression that I have long lost the trick of lying.

And when I read the first glance he gives me, when desire bewilders him a little and forces him back within himself, I shall be happy to be beautiful. Beneath his eyes my sound healthy self will brace up again, my inexhaustible twenty-seven years, my rounded limbs, everything which goes slightly to pieces when love is absent. Here is the offering, blond, slim, laughing, which I already present to you. . . . He will perceive uncomprehendingly that if I am a little more beautiful than myself, it is because by virtue of loving one comes to resemble the love one feels.

When he will have looked at me long, I will explain what each of my features means; I will speak. Because silence is beautiful after the last words, and it is the woman who has the most to say.

I may have a stronger expression than other women, perhaps a slightly more taciturn expression, too. My solitude would account for this. Women are not sufficiently alive to the fact that one should live alone, depart alone, and return alone, and that there is no one outside one's self. No one. In going to meet love again, I who have been twice widowed and have my child to make me feel more isolated, shall find nothing but another solitude. To be sure, there will be kisses, meetings, a symphony of voices. Yet in spite of everything to know you're alone, all the time. . . .

All the time. . . .

If I had reached this secure kingdom through my own power I should be very proud. But I don't deserve the credit. My dead lovers gave me this awful superhuman gift. For there comes a moment when you have taken from some one else everything there was to be taken. Without his noticing he becomes useless, he must disappear. Who resigns himself to this?

My lovers bestowed upon me the love I was capable of, attentive and complete, they bestowed upon me the intelligence of my blood, my tears and my words. . . .And then they gave me up. They performed this supreme deed.

And now when enlarged by love I desire love again, I give it its place. Love is not the essential thing. I have often said: "Life, my life." The phrase has assumed the shape of my lips because it says the essential thing. Love, after all is nothing but the most beautiful moment.

I summon all the moments of my life. Even the least thrilling cling just as deeply by roots of flesh.

Life wishes to become what it never has been: It is ready, it is empty. . . . Until tonight human words filled it saying:

"Nothing changes here below; nothing can possibly change: love goes on from age to age, death was and will be, life is forever the same, and man is always man." To express this the word "eternal" has been invented.

I do not know. I came, I, a woman, and like every other creature, I too began by loving. Life

was *not* the same, I swear it was not the same. Life had a different taste, I shouldered it differently, and my death, while resembling other deaths, does not exist by the same idea.

I am; everything is changed.

And even if I had never lived, other women are ready to change the earth. You can't tell yet what the women of my generation are capable of. They themselves don't know altogether.

The memory of what they have always been told weighs upon them. Man is a fierce, greedy lover. With bloodshot eyes like a blind man, he has fallen upon the feverish couch where lies the vanquished enemy. He has brought his boiling sap, and between his clasped arms a great tenderness. When he has risen from the couch, he has been sad, his eyes have been wasted, his tenderness worn out. And he has said: "This is woman."

This has lasted long. I do not know if there hasn't been some reason for it. I simply say I live. I am honest, exact, I have muscles of steel, I like people to say what is, I am loyal, willing, I earn my living, and I am inured to suffering. What truth does one fail to recognize when it shows its face?

I think. I want. I know.

It has taken me a long time to take in the humble things I now know. I commenced with very little; my youth passed in chaos, I had to suffer very much. So it is not chance, random truths that I follow. I do not set limits to them. Even

my death will not disprove them. Thus, a few scattered framents hover. I snatched and caught them in moments of alert intelligence, I held them fast with my willing heart, I gripped them between clenched teeth to keep from losing them.

The wind rises on the right. Is it not the wind that has extinguished those dots of gold, the houses, without deepening the dark of the town?

I see the wind, it is blowing near. And here, immobile, upright in my heavy rectitude, I share with the wind the moments which are driving it on. One by one. I fly with them, one by one.

I go where they are going, even elsewhere, and my death perhaps is far from reaching its limits. It has been on the way a long time, it will stop when I am completely tired out, when there will be nothing more for me to do, when my breath will not be an indispensable breath. Then that will be all. They say it is hard to die. Does that mean that the world holds something more tragic than life?

The wind has swollen the whole sky. The sky is ready to drop down from on high—ah, let the sky fall! The wind pins itself to my face. It has become so violent that I cross my arms on my breast to brave it. The infinite future, as though it too were swollen, approaches the houses.

How can I tell what the future holds? No use searching the violet depths of the horizon or breathing in the whole of the sky. The times to come are beyond my reach. They give no sign.

There, below, all I see is my own existence. But how I see it! Flashing, assiduous, full of free spaces, brooding, crimson in my veins, paling slightly at the horizon, departing in the starless wind, and returning in haste to my limbs.

The woof of the night has changed color again.

Can it be that what I am is a promise of something that should be?

The wind blows stronger.

No, it is not for nothing that tonight I am drawing a deeper breath than on all other nights, a breath stronger than my strength, rising up over my life.

Night passes, as pure as a summoning voice.

Then it must be, Lord, that soon, perhaps at dawn, you must go further than your journey and, in flashes of your being, reach heights higher than everything you have said, live to the last drop of your blood, live more than life?

Here I am.

THE END

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